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THE UNDERCURRENT

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Fay Ehlert

THE UNDERCURRENT

A One Act Play

BY

FAY EHLERT

PREFACE BY

JOHN POLLOCK

SAMUEL FRENCH
Thos. R. Edwards Managing Director
NEW YORK LOS ANGELES
SAMUEL FRENCH LTD. LONDON
1929

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Dedicated in appreciation

TO

MORT SINGER

BEN J. PIAZZA

THROUGH WHOM "THE UNDERCURRENT"
FOUND ITS WAY TO THE PROFES-
SIONAL STAGE

Smith 25 X

FOREWORD

"The Undercurrent" is a page from life's drama. From the very beginning—in the days when I haunted the Morals Court, the Domestic Relation Court and the Psychopathic Laboratory, I have always been drawn to our countless Annies, beaten, swept along, vague about everything in life—even their destination. And never have I found it in my heart to blame them for their plight. Sometimes people have said to me: "But Mrs. Ehlert, you can't tell me that this girl doesn't realize she is doing *wrong!* She knows better than to—" And I have always pleaded: "Please don't say a word against her, please don't! Perhaps, if we were in her shoes, we might be ten times worse than she! You never can tell by looking at a person, what undercurrent may be sweeping her along!"

And that is how I came to write this playlet. I took a typical Annie, one that you can find on any street, and thought: "Now, why is she a little street walker? What has been the cause? What may be the undercurrent in *her* life? What has brought her into the court?"

I didn't want to preach or teach a lesson. I simply wished to bring *real life* before audiences; something vital to make them think; to make them more sympathetic in their judgments of others, whether they were "Annies" or "Pa Fishyers." And the results of my experiment have touched me deeply.

Since our first performance, never have we failed to grip our audiences, to tug at their heartstrings. And these audiences have come from all walks of life, from the highest to the lowest; from women's clubs, social agencies, churches, charitable organizations, Little Theatres, courts, banks, stores and factories. Not a week passes but we are conscious of the effect our playlet is having upon the lives of others. From the scraggly bouquet of flowers sent over the footlights in Los Angeles with those laboriously scrawled lines: "From one whats got a husband like that" to the ring which a well-groomed Brooklyn woman insisted upon giving me with tears in her eyes, a little silver ring which she had worn on a black velvet ribbon ever since her granddaughter's death.

And our audiences have not been the only ones to receive us with outstretched hands! Coming into a new world, strange and foreign to us, I don't know what we should have done had not hundreds of hands reached out to help us along. And these

friendly gestures came from the members of the Radio-Keith-Orpheum Circuit, from the theatre managers and their staffs, and from the professional players on the bills with us. I wish to thank them again and again for the personal interest they took in our playlet and their unselfish efforts in our behalf.

It would be impossible for me to mention every individual and institution who graciously helped me launch my playlet on its career, but I would feel very ungrateful were I not to name: Frank Harris, Theodore B. Hinckley, John Vandervoort Sloan, C. J. Bulliet, James Gray, Frank Moneyhun, Fritz Blocki, Katherine Graham, Dr. George Scherger, Mary A. Blood, Edith S. Lueders, Mrs. John B. Boddie, Alice C. D. Riley, Ethel Rogers Swift, Bertha E. Burrill, Helen Sanford, C. Russell Small, May Kronan, Jennie Swanson, Caroline Cooper, the Columbia College of Expression, the University of Chicago, The Town and Gown Playshop of Northwestern University, the Evanston Woman's Club and the Drama League of Chicago.

As for my untiring cast, their devotion and loyalty to "The Undercurrent" has become almost a byword in the theatrical world. What would I have done without their assistance? My "six starlets"—God bless them!

And finally, I wish to thank those who in a great measure are responsible for the success of "The Undercurrent," the press in America and Canada, and the theatrical publications, The Billboard, Inside Facts, The National Vaudeville News, Variety, Zit's, and last but not least Samuel French, who is publishing "The Undercurrent."

PREFACE

The one-act play became a theatrical outcast. The waif roamed from door to door but no one bid the poor thing enter. Since the very beginning when Voltaire wrote and played short pieces for the Princes of France—pieces of that nature have encountered innumerable difficulties. They were always appendages of some sort or other. The going was particularly hard in America, until vaudeville and the Little Theatre provided a home for the tabloid play. Then the short dramatic works of eminent authors came into their own. Such writers as Barrie and Synge and Dunsany and Zangwell gave as much to the one-act play as they did to their longer efforts or novels. But the supply did not equal the demand. Everybody began to write one-act plays and soon they had deteriorated to the extent that there was no public for them.

The Little Theatre, having outgrown its babyhood, considered short plays beneath their dignity. Vaudeville discarded them almost entirely. The waif of the theatre became a wanderer, but just as the

wanderer was about to curl up in some dark corner and expire, "The Undercurrent" put in an appearance.

For the first time in years, an author had taken the one-act play seriously, attempted to write a piece of dramatic literature that as far as technique was concerned and drama was concerned, was as complete and as much an entirety as the play intended for a full evening's entertainment.

"The Undercurrent" was not the work of an established author. Writers of that ilk had been weaned away from the short play and would have nothing to do with it. Schools and colleges of course were paying considerable attention to the one-act play, but as the kindergarten of playwriting. The very first step in the course and to be abandoned just as the alphabet and spelling book make way for more advanced studies.

When Mrs. Fay Ehlert announced that the one-act play to her mind deserved serious consideration, she was laughed at, but Mrs. Ehlert is not the kind of a woman who may be laughed at with impunity. She not only stuck to her guns, but determined to prove the accuracy of her marksmanship.

"The Undercurrent" was the result. Writing a short play that treated a serious thought seriously; one that transposed a slice of actual life to paper

and the stage in an interesting, virile and vital manner, was the least of her difficulties. Having written such an opus her real troubles began.

"The Undercurrent" found no ready and waiting "welcome on any mat." It went from one door to another, only to find no latch string hanging out. Mrs. Ehlert was schooled in diplomacy. She is the wife of a Chilean Consul. Patience therefore was one of her many assets. She waited but worked as she waited; and finally succeeded in having "The Undercurrent" entered in the Chicago Little Theatre Tournament of 1928. The rest is a matter of history. "The Undercurrent" won first award. Seldom, if ever before, has a one-act play been in such great demand. And this is as it should be, for certainly not since the short play bowed out of the dramatic picture, no one has written a better, more interesting, or more entertaining playlet than this one.

Vaudeville, always quick to take advantage of opportunity, swept down on "The Undercurrent" like an eagle with the result that the longest consecutive tour ever arranged for any act went to this one of the "untouchables."

Little Theatres and the innumerable societies who produced plays for social and educational purposes, insisted that they be allowed to present "The Undercurrent."

Mrs. Ehlert, both because of her ability as a writer and her belief in the fact that drama is drama, regardless of its length, has done a big thing not only for herself but for the theatres in general. She has rekindled an interest in the short play. She has reestablished a public for the short play. She has demonstrated beyond the shadow of a doubt that even a miscellaneous audience appreciates something really worth while. She has reopened a road that will undoubtedly be traveled by many followers.

The one-act play has again come into its own. Because of Mrs. Ehlert and "The Undercurrent" the serious one-act play will again command the attention of established writers. There will again be a place for its presentation, and what is of even greater importance, is the fact that probably no longer will the one-act play be considered a proving ground for better things. "The Undercurrent" has turned the tide.

JOHN POLLOCK

"The Undercurrent," winner of The Drama League Cup at the Chicago Little Theatre Tournament, May 1928, was presented by the Town and Gown Play Shop of Northwestern University.

The following is the cast of "The Undercurrent" upon its first professional appearance at the Palace Theatre, Chicago, June 24th, 1928.

PA FISHYER.....*C. Russell Small*
MA FISHYER.....*Harriet Allyn*
ANNIE, their daughter.....*Gladys Pfeffer*
EMIL, their son.....*Charles White*
MRS. FLOYD, a neighbor.....*Helen Sanford*
MISS PAGE, a social worker.....*Ethel Rogers Swift*

Time: The Present Place: New York City

DESCRIPTION OF CHARACTERS

Pa Fishyer, *the janitor of the building, is a man of about fifty. He speaks in curt, terse sentences, and is continually grumbling under his breath. He is easily angered and will tolerate no opinion but his own. An honest man, but one who dominates his family through fear.*

Ma Fishyer *is a ground-down, care-worn woman of perhaps forty-five years of age. She moves quickly and bustles around constantly, as though to hide her nervous fears. She is ever alert to protect her children from her husband's harsh and relentless methods.*

Emil *is her childish son. Tall, gawky, docile and unobtrusive, he moves with a certain machine-like submission. Twenty-five may be his age.*

Annie, *about seventeen, is her mother's greatest "worry," a bit of human "driftwood."*

Mrs. Floyd *is a sharp-tongued, meddlesome neighbor.*

Miss Page, *capable, sympathetic, and firmly believing that "to understand all, means to forgive all," is an investigator for the Morals Court.*

THE UNDERCURRENT

THE UNDERCURRENT

SCENE: *In the basement kitchen which also does duty as living and dining room in an old-fashioned New York apartment building. An air of orderliness pervades the room, which is furnished with the meager belongings of the Fishyer family. Shabby, faded curtains hang limply on each side of the small iron-barred window to the left of the room. The galvanized sink is in the back, flanked on the right by the kitchen range and on the left by an old cupboard. A coat rack has been nailed to the side of this cupboard. Over the sink is a shelf, holding the alarm clock, comb and brush and shaving mug. The kitchen table covered with a red table cloth occupies almost the exact center of the room. Upon the table are four plates, knives, forks, cups and saucers, half a loaf of rye bread, a glass jar filled with teaspoons, and a partly filled bottle of milk. There are four chairs around the table.*

To the left of this table and near the front of the room stands a dilapidated horse-hair sofa. Directly vis-a-vis from this sofa at the Lower Right is a

Morris chair which through long usage has sagged and remolded itself to Pa Fishyer's *two-hundred odd pounds. The door at the Right leads into a short corridor through which the* Fishyer's *must pass in order to reach the bedrooms, boiler room, storeroom, back stairs, etc. A small table, ladened with pipes, tobacco jar and the Bible is to Right of this door, and the wall phone to the Left. A clothesline with its motley array of rags has been fastened to the hook above the phone and then stretched diagonally across the stove to the shelf above the sink. As this room is below the street level, it is necessary to mount the short flight of stairs Upper Left in order to reach the areaway door Upper Left.*

It is evening, about 5 minutes of six, and a light snow is falling. The feet of the passers-by can be seen through the dimly frosted window panes.

Ma Fishyer *is peering through the window. Her whole attitude is one of terrible anxiety and she turns with a half sob of relief as she hears the areaway door open stealthily.*

Ma Fishyer

[*Under her breath.*] A-annie?

Mrs. Floyd

[*Stalking down the stairs.*] Hello, there!

MA FISHYER

[*Swallowing her disappointment.*] Ach, it's yuh, Mis' Floyd! I—I thought yuh vas . . . [*She turns back to the window again*] . . . s-somebody else!

MRS. FLOYD

[*Maliciously.*] Didya now! [*Eyes* ANNIE's *place at table.*] Who fer instance?

MA FISHYER

Ach, eferybody alvays comes to de jeniter for something . . . maybe Mis' Richards about de g-garbage pails . . .

MRS. FLOYD

. . . or mebbe even Annie, huh?

MA FISHYER

[*Unaware of the other's curt smile.*] Shure, it's Thursday to-day . . . and she alvays comes . . .

MRS. FLOYD

Is that so? Well, ya never kin tell! [*Shakes fist at door Right.*] Huh, I got some news to spill in yer ear! [*Seats herself in* PA FISHYER's *chair, Right of table.*]

MA FISHYER

Ach, not—not now! [*Still peering out of win-*

dow.] Pa'll be here right avay and by six he vants to eat. Not a minute efter six vill he vait . . . [*She looks at the clock.*]

MRS. FLOYD

[*Leaning over.*] It's about someone ya know!

MA FISHYER

. . . and ef Annie ain't here on time . . . [*She turns startled as* MRS. FLOYD'S *last words reach her.*] . . . A-about somevun vat I know . . . vat I k-know?

MRS. FLOYD

[*Venting her spite.*] I'll tell de world ya do!

MA FISHYER

It ain't nothin' bad?

MRS. FLOYD

Bad? Well! [*She glares at the door Right.*] I imagine some people what thinks *my* son ain't good company fer their daughter—certainly are going to have a fit to-night! [*With compressed lips.*] I'll say *he* is! Yes, siree!

MA FISHYER

[*Coming slowly towards her.*] It ain't 'bout Annie?

MRS. FLOYD

Nuthin' else but!

MA FISHYER

[*Moans.*] Ach! [*Goes fearfully towards door Right and, half opening it, listens intently.*]

MRS. FLOYD

My son may be a little wild, but he ain't never been *arrested* yet.

MA FISHYER

Arrest . . . [*She darts forward and puts her hand over* MRS. FLOYD'S *mouth.*] Shhhh!

MRS. FLOYD

[*Sputtering.*] Say . . .

MA FISHYER

[*She glances terror-stricken to door.*] Pleese to go now—he-he's comin', h-he's c-comin'!

MRS. FLOYD

What of it? I ain't skeered of him.

MA FISHYER

P-pleese, not now! [*Desperately.*] Not now—come efter vile . . . pleese . . . [*Tugs at her dress.*]

MRS. FLOYD

[*Rising.*] All right! I'll go! [*Shakes her off.*] But stop pushing! I'm going! [*Hobbles up the stairs and slams door. Before* MA FISHYER *can breathe her relief, she opens the door again.*] But I'll be back later!

MA FISHYER

Yess, yess, l-later . . .

[*Scarcely has the door closed after* MRS. FLOYD *when* PA FISHYER *enters wearily from door Right.*]

FISHYER

[*Throwing his denim jacket over Morris chair.*] Huh! [*He strides over to the sink and begins washing himself.*] Huh! Supper ready?

MA FISHYER

[*At the table.*] A-almost . . .

FISHYER

[*He growls.*] Almost? Don'tcha know yess or no?

[*He pushes up his spectacles and glares at the clock.*] Vere's Annie? It's nearly six already!

MA FISHYER

De c-clock iss a l-little f-fest . . . [*Walks nervously to window.*]

FISHYER

Fest? Dat clock iss *alvays* right, yuh hear me? Alvays right!

MA FISHYER

Yess, P-pa!

FISHYER

[*His wrath increasing.*] Vell, vere iss she?

MA FISHYER

[*Busies herself at stove.*] Na, Pa, she'll he h-here eny minute soon! Yuh know, h-how de l-lady k-keeps her! [*She glances at the door through which* MRS. FLOYD *has left.*] And m-maybe—in dis b-bed veather, she kent come at all!

FISHYER

Vat! [*Drying his hands.*]

MA FISHYER

I—I mean—efen in *good* veather, only vunce a a veek does she haff a day off.

FISHYER

Dat'll do! [*Throws towel on sink.*] Ve vait 'til six . . . [*Takes Bible from table and seats himself in Morris chair.*] . . . and den ve eat! [*Groans as he rubs his rheumatic left arm.* EMIL *enters from door Right.*] Na, Dummy, vat did she vant? [*Points upward.*]

EMIL

[*Timidly.*] She fergot her key and . . .

FISHYER

. . . and yuh hed to open de door for her! [*He growls.*] Vy don't yuh say dat right avay? [*He begins reading the Bible, following each word with his finger.*]

MA FISHYER

Come, Emil . . . [*She nods warningly in Fishyer's direction.*] . . . and vash yerself.

FISHYER

[*He reads laboriously.*] "Train op a child in de

vay he should go . . . [*Glares at* Emil *and then repeats.*] . . . de vay he *should* go! [*Reads.*] . . . and ven he iss old . . . [*Repeats to himself.*] . . . old . . . he vill not depart from it . . .

[*There is a knock at the outer door Left and* Ma Fishyer *stands transfixed, her face ashen.* Emil, *his hands half-washed, looks inquiringly at his father.*]

Fishyer

Na, open de door!

Emil

[*Hurriedly wiping his hands on his trousers, he mounts the steps and opens the door.*] Whatcha want?

Miss Page

Good evening! Does Annie Fishyer live here?

Emil

Yeh . . . [*He shuffles back to the sink.*] . . . come on in!

Miss Page

[*Descending the stairs.*] Thank you. I wasn't quite sure. [*Kindly to* Ma Fishyer.] You must be Annie's mother and . . .

FISHYER

I em Karl Fishyer!

MISS PAGE

Ah, yes, Annie's father. [*She smiles her quick warm smile.*] I don't think you know me. I am Miss Page, a special investigator from the Morals Court!

MA FISHYER

[*Tremulously to* FISHYER.] De lady, Pa, de l-lady vat Annie v-vorks f-for . . .

FISHYER

So?

MISS PAGE

[*Surprised.*] Works for me?

MA FISHYER

[*Hurriedly.*] Pleese to come and sit down, Mis', here on de sofa! [*She deftly dusts the sofa with a swish of her apron and then steps back and looks at* MISS PAGE *apprehensively.*]

MISS PAGE

I think you are mistaking me . . . [*She stops as she sees* MA FISHYER's *drawn face.*]

MA FISHYER

[*Indicating the sofa.*] P-pleese, Mis' . . .

[PA FISHYER *meanwhile replaces the Bible on the table.* MISS PAGE *sits down without another word.*]

MA FISHYER

[*Quickly.*] Annie a-ain't home yet, b-but . . .

MISS PAGE

[*Puzzled.*] Isn't home yet? Are you expecting her?

FISHYER

Huh? [*He turns towards them.*] Shure—I expect her to come!

MA FISHYER

Y-yess, she always c-c-comes here on her day off—Pa means!

MISS PAGE

[*Probing gently.*] Her day off?

MA FISHYER

Maybe she n-nefer tells yuh, b-but she alvays

c-c-comes here Thursdays. [*She wets her lips.*] D-don't she, Pa?

FISHYER

[*Grudgingly*] Huh! [*To* MISS PAGE.] Since she's vid yuh, Mis', yess!

MA FISHYER

[*She talks to* MISS PAGE, *but her eyes are anxiously on* FISHYER.] And efery cent vat she earns by yuh, she brings to her Pa!

MISS PAGE

She—does what? [*Drawing off her gloves.*]

MA FISHYER

E-efery cent she brings to her Pa! She iss a fine girl . . .

FISHYER

[*Cutting her short.*] Vat's dot to brag ofer?

MISS PAGE

[*Soothingly.*] *Well,* I'm sure Annie is . . .

MA FISHYER

[*Eagerly.*] Yuh hear, Pa? Efen Mis' Page sez vat a fine Annie ve got.

FISHYER

Huh, she's purty goot *now!* But before she vent mit yuh, Mis' . . . [*He clenches his fist in wrath.*] . . . *I*—her fadder—didn't know vhere she vas for three months efen . . . [MISS PAGE *suppresses a start.*]

MA FISHYER

[*Imploringly.*] But Pa, yuh know *now* vere she vas! [*To* MISS PAGE.] H-he m-means de time ven she v-vas by yuh in . . . [*She swallows hard.*] . . . de *country.*
[MISS PAGE *conceals her astonishment.*]

FISHYER

Efen ef she vas . . .

MA FISHYER

. . . and how vell she looked ven . . .

FISHYER

. . . she come home agen! [*He paces angrily back and forth.*] I hear dot a million times already, too!

MA FISHYER

But P-pa . . .

FISHYER

All I say iss—dot's no vay to treat yur fadder! And efter de strict bringing op I giff de children, dey must remember—always—dat I em dere fadder! *I em de boss here!* [*To* EMIL *crouching against the wall.*] Yuh hear me?

MA FISHYER

[*Imploringly.*] Pa, pleese, Pa.

FISHYER

[*Glaring at the clock.*] It's six; ve eat now! [*He seats himself at table Right and begins slicing bread, motions* EMIL *to his seat,* EMIL *sits facing the audience.*]

MISS PAGE

[*She has been watching them attentively.*] Yes, don't let me interrupt you!

FISHYER

I always eat at six! [*Turns towards stove.*] Vere iss dot girl? [MA *comes to table with platter of stew which she places quickly before him.*] Vat time yuh let her come to-day, Mis' . . .?

[*Before she can answer, steps are heard and* ANNIE *enters hurriedly from the areaway door.*]

FISHYER

Dere she iss! [*Points at her with knife.*]

ANNIE

[*Breathlessly.*] Oh, Pa, I couldn't . . . I couldn't help it, I wuz . . . [*She sees* EMIL'S *finger surreptiously signaling* MISS PAGE'S *presence. She gives* MISS PAGE *a terror-stricken look, then shrinks back against the wall for support.*]

ANNIE

[*Gasps*] Oh!

MA FISHYER

[*She goes towards her quickly and holding her tight against her breast, speaks so as to give her time to recover.*] Ach, no vunder she iss surprised to see her lady here!

ANNIE

[*Clinging to her.*] Ma!

MISS PAGE

[*Slowly, with great significance.*] I had an errand to do in this neighborhood, Annie, and as I passed this house, I stopped in . . . [*Sees* MA FISHYER'S

pleading look.] . . . to . . . to get acquainted with your parents!

FISHYER

And ve are gled to know yuh also. [*He motions to the table.*] Yuh eat mit us?
[EMIL *pushes out* ANNIE'S *chair for her.*]

MISS PAGE

No, thank you. If you don't mind, I'll just sit here.

FISHYER

Shure! Make yurself to home.
[*He bangs on the table with his knife.*] Ma, ve eat now!
[ANNIE *hangs her coat and hat on coat rack.*]

FISHYER

[*Motioning to* ANNIE.] Sit down! [ANNIE *slips into her chair, facing her father.* MA FISHYER *brings coffee pot to table.*]

MISS PAGE

[*Observing* EMIL *with interest.*] I didn't know Annie had a brother.

MA FISHYER

[*Hurriedly, before* FISHYER *can answer.*] Ach, yess, and sotch a good boy! He helps his Pa take care off de house.

FISHYER

[*Grudgingly.*] Huh!

MA FISHYER

[*Dishing out the food to* EMIL *and* ANNIE.] And some day, he'll be a jeniter, too! And like our coffee man sez: "Jeniter vork iss nuthin' to sneeze at!" So vat vid Pa's rheumatism, ve are gled to haff Emil help so nice!

FISHYER

Emil—bahhh! [EMIL *crouches behind his mother's arm.*]

MA FISHYER

And yuh haff no idea, Mis', how mutch vork dere iss here to do! [*Pours coffee.*] So vid our Emil . . . [FISHYER *laughs derisively.*]

MISS PAGE

[*Soothingly.*] Yes, you must be kept very busy, Mr. Fishyer!

FISHYER

Bizzy? Yuh don't know it, Mis', how crazy . . . [*He points upward with his knife.*] . . . dose vomens get me! First, vun comes and sez de vater iss too hot—dat efery time she turns it on—she a Turkish bath gets! Den . . . [*The phone rings.*] Yuh see, not efen peace on a meal I got . . . [*Pushes back his chair.*]

MA FISHYER

Vait, Pa, I go! [*She hurries to phone.*] Hollo! Yess, Mis' Richards, yess, he *iss* by de boiler . . . [PA FISHYER *motions for* EMIL *to go out.*] . . . puttin' more coal on! Yess, mam! [*She turns from phone just in time to see* EMIL's *scowling gesture at his father's back.*] Emil! [*Grabs his cap in frantic haste.*] Yur cap . . . [*Pushes him towards door Right.*] . . . quick!

[PA FISHYER, *unaware of what is passing in back of his chair, pounds the table emphatically, with his fist.*

With a terrified look, EMIL *rushes out, letting* MA FISHYER *close the door behind him.*]

FISHYER

[*He raises his head stubbornly.*] I tell yuh, dat voman could by de devil sit and yet be cold!

MA FISHYER

Yess, yess, Pa! But ve are gled to haff dis job! And vat . . . mit our Emil and Annie helpin' so nice . . .

FISHYER

Helpin'! Bahhhh!

MA FISHYER

Ach, Mis' Page, efery night I thank de good Gott for my Annie . . .

ANNIE

[*She turns quickly and gives her* MOTHER *a beseeching glance.*] Ma . . . oh, M-ma . . . [*Her coffee cup falls from her nerveless hand, spilling its contents on her dress.*]

FISHYER

Huh!

ANNIE

Pa . . . P-pa . . . it slipped! I—I'll change my dress! [*She rushes out door Right.*]

FISHYER

[*Looks after her.*] Huh!

[*Accuses* Ma Fishyer *while he dips his bread in his coffee.*] Fine manners, she got!
[*Phone rings again.*]

Ma Fishyer

[*Running to phone.*] Yess, yess, Mis' Richards! [*Into receiver.*] Hollo . . . Yess, Mis' Richards, he *iss* . . .

Fishyer

[*Exasperated.*] Oh, vat a dummy of a son, I got! [*To* Ma Fishyer.] Maybe he fell in de coal bin again! [*Exits door Right rubbing his rheumatic left arm.*]

[Ma Fishyer *turns from the phone, listens a moment at the door through which* Pa Fishyer *has gone, then quickly crosses the room to* Miss Page. *Her whole manner has changed; she seems to have shrunk suddenly.*]

Ma Fishyer

I em gled to know yuh, Mis'! [*She clasps and unclasps her hands.*] And my Annie—my Annie . . .

Miss Page

[*Gently.*] Sit down, Mrs. Fishyer!

MA FISHYER

[*She sinks down in* ANNIE'S *chair at the left of the table.*] She—she iss mit y-yuh?

MISS PAGE

[*Compassionately.*] In a way—yes.

MA FISHYER

In a vay?

MISS PAGE

Yes, I am interested in her welfare and am looking after her.

MA FISHYER

[*Scarcely audible.*] S-she don't live m-mit yuh?

MISS PAGE

Not exactly . . .

MA FISHYER

Ach, don't tell dis to Pa! [*In despair.*] Pleese, pleese, don't tell him enyding vat iss agenst her!

MISS PAGE

[*Leaning forward.*] I don't understand.

MA FISHYER

If—if he knows eferyding [*Swallowing with difficulty.*] . . . h-he kills her!

MISS PAGE

[*Gently.*] Do *you* know everything about her?

MA FISHYER

[*Terrified.*] No, no, don't tell me! Pleese not to tell me! I don't vant to know!

MISS PAGE

Not even when you may be able to help her?

MA FISHYER

[*Shaking her head.*] All I kin do . . . [*Motioning to the boiler room.*] . . . iss to keep *him* from findin' out d-dings about her! [*She looks her full in the face.*] I don't vant to know enyding agenst my Annie!

MISS PAGE

[*Puzzled.*] But if you remain in ignorance—how can you be of assistance?

MA FISHYER

[*Tremulously.*] I kin help her only by—knowin' nodding.

MISS PAGE

What do you mean? You as her mother should be anxious to know.

MA FISHYER

Yess, yuh haff right! But yuh don't know Pa! [*She whispers.*] He alvays suspicions eferybody! Me—Emil—Annie! He dinks I hide from him someding about de children! [*She pauses.*] And den—it best iss I don't know dings. [*Slowly.*] Ven yuh don't know dings, he kent be scoldin' yuh all de time!

MISS PAGE

[*Aghast.*] But—why should he?

MA FISHYER

[*Bitterly.*] Ach, vy! Vy should he? [*She passes her hand across her eyes.*] Vat kin yuh do mit a man vat hass in his head only *vun idea!*

MISS PAGE

One idea?

MA FISHYER

Vun idea! [*Brokenly.*] Dot all children should be brought op *strict*—mit mutch scoldin' and vhippin'.

MISS PAGE

[*Indignantly.*] But can't you convince him that such harsh methods . . .

MA FISHYER

[*Sobs.*] I k-kin do nodding mit him—no vun kin! [*She beats her clenched fist against her forehead.*] He hass dot vun idea in his head and . . . [*She stares frantically at the door through which* MRS. FLOYD *has gone.*] . . . h-he must n-nefer find out!

MISS PAGE

Find out what? [*As* MA FISHYER *rocks back and forth weeping.*] Don't be afraid. Tell me.

MA FISHYER

[*Tearfully.*] Pleese, Mis' Page, don't let him find out dings a-agenst A-Annie! [*Weeps.*] P-p-pleese, pleese see I go on m-my knees t-to yuh! [*Sinks down at* MISS PAGE'S *knees.*] Pleese . . . p-p-pleese!

MISS PAGE

[*Her eyes filled with tears.*] Don't cry, don't! [*She places her arm around her shaking shoulders.*] Why didn't you come to see me?

MA FISHYER

[*Weeping as she grasps* MISS PAGE'S *hands in agony.*] Ach, I vanted to c-come so m-meny t-times and esk yuh . . . take c-care off Annie! L-look efter her . . . b-but I vas afraid!

MISS PAGE

Afraid?

MA FISHYER

Yess, because . . . m-maybe . . .

MISS PAGE

[*She looks with sudden understanding towards* ANNIE'S *chair.*] . . . there *was* no Miss Page?

MA FISHYER

Yess! But n-now I seen yuh! [*She grasps her arms convulsively.*] Yuh *vill* l-look out for her, von't yuh? [*She wails.*] It iss all I haff in de vorld—my two c-children—all I haff. [*Sinks weeping bitterly against* MISS PAGE.]

[EMIL'S *whimpering cry is heard from the boiler room.*]

EMIL

M-ma! Oh, Ma!

MA FISHYER

[*She starts up.*] It's Emil! Yuh vill oxcuse me? [*Wearily.*] I gotta go—he forgot agen to open de valve maybe! [*She grabs her shawl from the coat rack.*] And Pa mit hiss rheumatism kent reach op . . .

[MISS PAGE *rises.*]

FISHYER

[*Angrily from the boiler room.*] Ma! Yuh hear me?

MA FISHYER

Yess, Pa! [*To* MISS PAGE.] Yuh *vill* take care off her?

FISHYER

Ma! Come here!

MA FISHYER

[*She chokes back the tears as she opens the door to the boiler room.*] Yess, Pa, I em c-comin'! [*She whispers back to* MISS PAGE.] And pleese, alvays to remember—Pa should know nodding agenst her.

[*She backs out murmuring.*] No-nodding . . . n-n-odding.

[Miss Page *dries her own tears and looks about the room with distaste. Then she goes resolutely to the door Right and opens it.*]

Miss Page

[*Calling softly.*] Annie! Annie! [*Motions.*] Come out here! [Miss Page *walks to table.*]

[Annie *enters and closes door softly. She listens attentively, her face pressed against the door.*]

Miss Page

[*Back of* Emil's *chair.*] What have you been telling them?

Annie

[*On the defensive.*] Nuthin' much . . . only that I worked for ya as a hired girl!

Miss Page

Why did you do that?

Annie

[*Back of arm chair.*] So's to get away from here! If he thought I wuz a dish washer in a restaurant I'd

hafta live here! [*She shudders.*] Nuthin' doin'! I had seventeen years of it!

MISS PAGE

Yes, but still this is your home.

ANNIE

Yeh! [*Tremulously.*] And I know what it's like!

MISS PAGE

Didn't you tell anyone? [ANNIE *shakes her head.*] Not even your mother?

ANNIE

[*Goes quickly towards* MISS PAGE. *Aghast.*] And have him beat it outta her? Whadda ya think I am?

MISS PAGE

[*Puzzled.*] Why did you tell them you worked for me?

ANNIE

Well, I—I hadda give somebody's name and yuh wuz de only one I could think of! [*Glances quickly towards closed door Right, then pleads.*] B-before that happened last year, Miss Page, I n-nearly

w-went crazy, and when I fell over *that time* and ya sent m-me to de home until e-everything wuz over . . . I—j-jest sorta never forgotcha!

MISS PAGE

[*Severely.*] Yes, but what has that to do with all this?

ANNIE

W-well, I n-needed some sorta alibi fer stayin' away from here . . . [*Moves slowly down stage Right.*] . . . s-so I—I told 'em I *worked* for ya and that ya wuz goin' out to de *c-country* and I hadda go 'long!

MISS PAGE

[*Insistent.*] And what else?

ANNIE

W-well, when I got outta de *hospital,* I stuck to my story and only came here Thursdays.

MISS PAGE

[*With a helpless gesture.*] Oh, Annie, why can't you behave yourself?

ANNIE

[*Vehemently.*] I *do,* Miss Page, honest I do!

[*Crosses to Lower Left to escape* Miss Page's *searching eyes.*] B-but I can't help it if there's a-always somebody s-snitchin' on ya!

Miss Page

[*Reproachfully.*] Snitching! But Annie . . .

Annie

[*Nervously, twisting and untwisting her belt.*] I d-don't care *what* they say! I—I didn't pick up with that feller on de s-street! He—h-he wuz in de room when I g-got in last night!

Miss Page

[*Coming towards her, slowly.*] And *how* did he get there?

Annie

[*Feebly.*] Oh—er—one of de girls musta let'm have de key!

Miss Page

[*Sadly.*] Those girls! [Annie *shrinks further away.*] Why do you live with them? You promised me the last time, you wouldn't have anything more to do with Mame and Lottie!

Annie

[*Haltingly.*] But they'se so good to me, Mis' Page!

I gotta live some place . . . it might as well be with dem . . .

MISS PAGE

. . . and get yourself constantly into trouble?

ANNIE

[*Protesting.*] Oh, Mis' Page! Ya don't want me to live *here,* do ya? [*Tremulously.*] Gee, if it wuzn't fer Ma I'd n-never come h-here! B-but Ma . . . [*Her whole heart is in her voice.*] . . . she's m-my M-ma . . . [*Sobs.*] . . . s-she's m-my M-m-ma!

MISS PAGE

[*Walks up and puts her arm around* ANNIE's *shaking shoulders, holds her tight.*] What's going to become of you, Annie?

ANNIE

[*With hopeless shrug.*] I dunno—and I don't care! [*Moves away.*] Just so long . . . [*Nods to door Right.*] . . . as *he* don't ketch on!

MISS PAGE

[*Walks thoughtfully back a few steps towards door Right before turning.*] Do you know why I came here to-night?

ANNIE

N-no.

MISS PAGE

I came here to find out the kind of home you have, so when I see the Judge . . . [ANNIE *looks up startled.*] . . . to-morrow morning, I can tell him a little more about you!

ANNIE

[*Whispers.*] A-about me?

MISS PAGE

Yes! [*Earnestly.*] I've always been on the square with you, haven't I, Annie? [ANNIE *nods.*] And I want to help you all I can. *But* you've been picked up four times during the last five months for loitering on the streets late at night! [*As* ANNIE *starts to appeal.*] And *last* night the *police* raided the flat you were in!

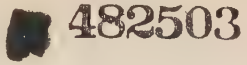
ANNIE

[*Protesting.*] But honest, Mis' Page, I couldn't help it! [*She looks about her like an hunted animal.*] Ya see, I wuz . . . wuz . . . shhh!

[*The areaway door has opened and* MRS. FLOYD *appears on top stair.*]

MRS. FLOYD

[*Her beady eyes glisten in anticipation as she surveys* ANNIE.] Hello, there! [*She stumps down the stairs.*]

ANNIE 

[*Instinctively on the defensive.*] H-hello! [*Moves forward to head her off.*] Ma's helping Pa!
[MISS PAGE *crosses to sofa.*]

MRS. FLOYD

[*Shaking off* ANNIE's *restraining hand.*] Oh, is she now! [*Pulls out* EMIL's *chair.*] Then I'll wait fer her!

ANNIE

[*In desperate fear, jerks her around.*] I toldja, she's helpin' Pa!

MRS. FLOYD

[*Flinging her against the cupboard.*] Lissen, girlie, I gotcha de *first* time!
[MA FISHYER *enters hastily from door Right.*]

ANNIE

[*Almost hysterical in her fright.*] Then beat it!

MA FISHYER

Ach, Mis' Floyd, I heard yuh close yur door! Ve—ve heff company now . . . maybe it be better ve go on to *yer* flet . . .

MRS. FLOYD

Oh, this suits me, I ain't pertic'ler! [*Seats herself in* EMIL's *chair. Watching* ANNIE *signalling to* MISS PAGE.] Who's her friend?

MA FISHYER

[*Nervously.*] Oxcuse me, but dis iss Annie's Mis' Page . . .

MRS. FLOYD

[*In response to* MISS PAGE's *nod.*] Pleased to meetcha! [ANNIE *crosses over to her* MOTHER *and whispers distractedly in her ear.*]

MA FISHYER

Ve ain't finished our supper yet! Maybe it's better I come ofer and see yuh efter vile.

MRS. FLOYD

[*Not to be budged.*] After while nuthin'! What did she say?

[PA FISHYER *enters unnoticed, wiping his hands.*]

MA FISHYER

[*Piteously.*] Pleese, Mis' Floyd, eny minute now . . . Pa . . . Pa comes . . .

MRS. FLOYD

[*She thumbs towards* ANNIE.] Did she say she wuz arrested?

FISHYER

Arrested! [*All look up in surprise.* ANNIE *cowers against the sink.*] Who vas arrested?

MA FISHYER

[*At bay.*] Ach, Mis' Floyd hass just been talkin'—er—no vitch vay to me, h'aintcha, Mis' Floyd?

FISHYER

Na—all right! [*He thunders at his wife.*] But who vas arrested?

MRS. FLOYD

Who? [*Spitefully.*] Well, Mr. Fishyer, a'course, it ain't none of *my* business, *but* seeing what good neighbors we been and how *pertic'ler* ya wuz to let me know that my son is a good-fer-nuthin' loafer—I take great pleasure ta letcha know that one of *yer* swell family is, wuz or will be arrested!

FISHYER

Vat? My family vat I bring up so strict?

MRS. FLOYD

[*She cackles derisively.*] Uhuh! Ain't it the limit?

FISHYER

[*Purpling with rage.*] Who iss it?

MA FISHYER

[*Clinging to his arm.*] Pa, pleese, . . . P-Pa . . .

FISHYER

[*He shakes her off.*] Na, are yuh deef? Na—*who* I say?

MRS. FLOYD

[*Vindictively.*] Who else but yer Annie!

[ANNIE *becomes deathly pale and shrinks against the wall Lower Right.*]

FISHYER

[*Turns furiously.*] *Vat?*

MA FISHYER

[*She thrusts herself between* FISHYER *and* ANNIE. *Frantically.*] Mis' Page, Mis' Page . . .

ANNIE

[*Clasping her mother convulsively, whimpers.*] M-ma!

MISS PAGE

[*Quickly.*] There—there must be some mistake! Where did you hear this, Mrs. Floyd?

MRS. FLOYD

Well . . . a friend of mine went ta the Domestic Relation Court ta-day ta see about that husband of her'n—a perfect brute . . .

FISHYER

[*Impatiently.*] Yeh, nefer mind about de brute!

MRS. FLOYD

And so I went along, because I been readin' a dandy story about the Morals Court—yeh know . . . [*She winks to* MISS PAGE *as she thumbs in* ANNIE'S *direction.*] . . . where them girls are taken . . . anda so I sez ta myself . . . sez I . . .

FISHYER

[*Exasperated.*] Vat?

MRS FLOYD

That's what I'm comin' ta. So I sez ta myself, I'll

visit the Morals Court and see if them fellas from the papers tells the truth! [FISHYER *almost beside himself with frenzy.*] But I stayed so long with my friend that the Judge wuz jest closin' fer the day. *But* who should I see there—but Annie!

FISHYER

[*Choking with wrath, turns wildly with up-lifted fist towards* ANNIE.] Annie, come here!

MA FISHYER

[*Holding him back.*] Don't, Pa, pleese, don't . . .

FISHYER

[*Trying to loosen her hold.*] Keep quiet!

MISS PAGE

[*Resolutely.*] That isn't anything at all, Mr. Fishyer!

FISHYER

[*Bellows.*] Vat *more* yuh vant, efter bringin' up a girl so strict?

MA FISHYER

[*Screams in terror as she feels herself overpowered.*] Pa, pleese, P-pa . . .

FISHYER

Vill yuh keep qviet! [*Furiously to* ANNIE, *whimpering in terror.*] First, I giff yuh someding to remember me by . . . and den out off de *house* yuh go!

MA FISHYER

[*Fighting to hold him back.*] N-no, Pa, don't . . .

FISHYER

[*Throwing her on the floor in front of table.*] Get out off my vay, Ma! [*He shouts enraged.*] Annie, come here! Yuh hear me! [*He grasps her left arm and jerks her towards him.*]

ANNIE

[*Writhing in pain as he tightens his hold.*] No—no! It's—it's a lie—a lie . . .

MRS. FLOYD

[*Rising in surprise.*] Huh!

ANNIE

Yes, it is! [*She glares about her with the desperation of a trapped animal.*] Yes, it is! I—I wuz . . . there . . . [*She points sobbingly to* MISS PAGE.] . . . with her!

FISHYER

Mit her? Mis' Page?

ANNIE

[*Trying to loosen his grip.*] Yes, I wuz helpin' her carry her books . . . [*She nods to* MRS. FLOYD.] . . . when she musta seen me!
[MISS PAGE *is startled at* ANNIE'S *lie.*]

FISHYER

[*Tightening his cruel hold until she falls sobbing on her knees.*] Vat yuh mean?

ANNIE

[*The words fairly tumble from her twitching lips.*] Mis' Page works fer de Judge—h-helps him . . . And I often go to de court with h-her . . . don't I, Mis' Page?
[*An agonizing second.* MISS PAGE *gives one glance at* MA FISHYER'S *prostrated form on the floor and then rises to the occasion.*]

MISS PAGE

Yes! She's *always* there with me!

ANNIE

[*Sobs.*] And—I been there lots of times, ain't I, Mis' Page?

[*Quickly before* Miss Page *can reply,* Ma Fishyer *thrusts herself between* Pa Fishyer *and* Annie.]

Ma Fishyer

[*Tries to separate his iron grip from* Annie's *arm.*] Yuh see, Pa? yuh see?

Fishyer

[*To* Miss Page, *slightly mollified.*] Ef she's vid *yuh,* Mis' . . . dot's all right, den! [*Flings* Annie *and* Ma Fishyer *from him. While* Ma Fishyer *tenderly kisses* Annie's *arm he turns wrathfully towards* Mrs. Floyd.] *BUT!* [Mrs. Floyd, *who seeing his intentions, scurries up the stairs.*] . . . Goodbye, Mis' Floyd! [*Runs up the stairs and shouts after her.*] And next time yuh *look* first before yuh jump! [*Crashes door after her.*]

[Ma Fishyer *is holding* Annie *tightly in her arms. Both are weeping.*]

Fishyer

So! [*Comes down stairs.*] Dis should be a lesson for yuh, Annie! Yuh see now vat maybe heppens ef I don't bring yuh up so strict! [*Shakes fist after* Mrs. Floyd.] Dat cat vat just left might be in de right!

[Emil *re-enters and moves wonderingly towards sink.*]

MA FISHYER

[*Her breath sobbing in her throat.*] Y-yess, Pa, y-yess . . .

FISHYER

[*Sternly flinging her away from* ANNIE *so that she falls into* EMIL'S *arms.*] Let her alone, Ma! Vat kind off bringin' up is dot? [*To* MISS PAGE.] I tell yuh, Mis', my fadder alvays said: "Order rules de vorld, but *man* iss ruled vid de *vhip!*" And he vas right! [*Glares at* ANNIE.] He ruled us vid a hand off iron! [*To* MISS PAGE.] And look on me! I haf de greatest respect for my fadder! [*Gives them all a menacing look.*] And I do de same! Alvays am I strict and ven dey grow old, dey'll tank me for it! [*He sits down at the table and motions* EMIL *to his seat again.* EMIL *sidles into his chair guardedly.* PA FISHYER *begins his meal, dipping his chunk of rye bread in the gravy.* MISS PAGE *notices the looks of hatred darted at* PA FISHYER *by both* ANNIE *and* EMIL.]

MISS PAGE

[*Curiously.*] And—did you love your father, Mr. Fishyer?

FISHYER

[*Taken aback.*] Lofe? [*He stops with his coffee*

cup half-way.] Shure, I lofe him ven I respect him! [*Grimly.*] Huh! [*Cracking an imaginary whip.*] He'd made us dance to de muzik off de stick ef ve didn't lofe him! Shure . . . [*He pauses.*] . . . Shure, de children alvays lofe . . . [*Fixes his eye on* Emil *who immediately stops drinking his coffee.*] . . . de *fadder*!

[Emil *draws back in consternation.*]

Miss Page

[*Seeing the futility of the situation, turns thoughtfully to the sofa for her gloves and purse.*] Well, it's late and I must be going! [*She pauses a second in thought, then comes to a decision.*] By the way, Mr. Fishyer, would you mind if I take Annie with me?

Fishyer

Right avay? I vanted to giff her a good talkin' to, yet!

Miss Page

[*Pulling on her gloves.*] I'm so sorry, but I'm leaving for the country early in the morning . . .

Ma Fishyer

[*Staring fixedly at* Miss Page.] De c-country?

MISS PAGE

[*Smiling at her, very gently.*] The *real* country, Mrs. Fishyer!

FISHYER

[*He grunts, between mouthfuls.*] Shure, mit yuh it's all right! [*Over his shoulder to* ANNIE.] Put on yur tings, Annie!

[*For a moment, while his back is turned,* MA FISHYER *crushes* ANNIE *sobbingly to her breast, kissing her again and again.*]

ANNIE

[*Covering her* MOTHER'S *tear-stained cheeks with kisses, she whispers brokenly.*] Don't Ma, don't, I'll be good! I'll be good!

MA FISHYER

[*Sobs, clinging to her.*] Annie . . . [MISS PAGE, *separating the two, holds* MA FISHYER *tight in her arms.*] Little Annie!

MISS PAGE

[*While* ANNIE *gets her coat and hat from the coat rack.*] Good-bye, Mrs. Fishyer, you needn't worry! [*Looks sternly at* PA FISHYER, *unconcernedly, eating his meal.*] I'll take good care of your Annie!

[MA FISHYER, *unable to utter a word, leans over and*

kisses MISS PAGE'S *hand.* MISS PAGE *turns and mounts the stairs leading to the areaway. As she opens the door,* FISHYER *looks up.*]

FISHYER

Good-bye, Mis', and ef she don't behave herself . . . [ANNIE *clings to her. He balls his fist.*] . . . yuh just let me know!

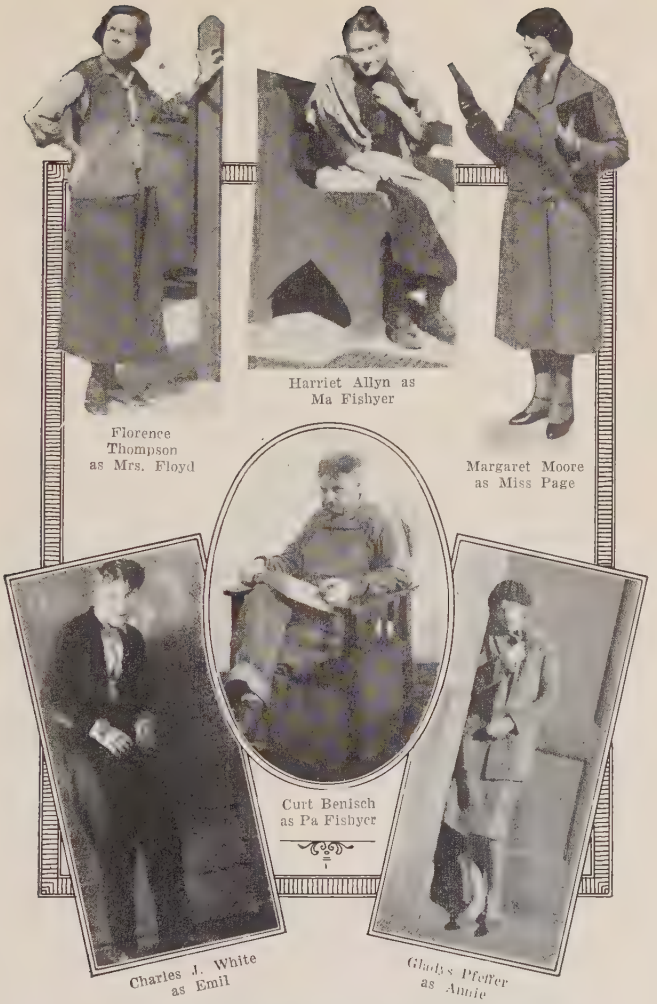
MISS PAGE

[*Her arm protectingly around* ANNIE, *she eyes him, half sadly, half ironically.*] Yes, indeed! You'd be a *great* help!

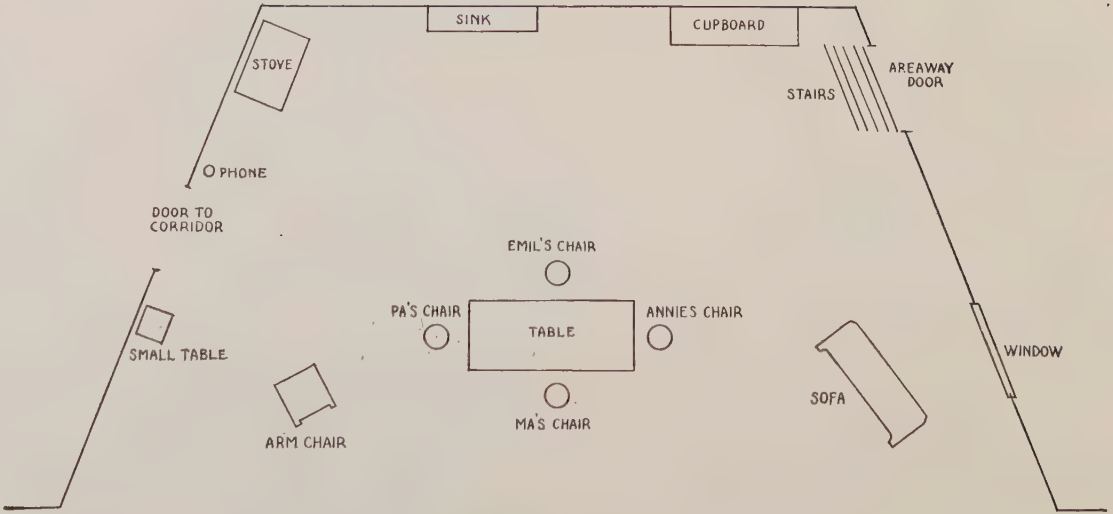
FISHYER

[*Nods his self-satisfaction and takes his second cupful of coffee.*] Shure!

[*The curtain descends as* MA FISHYER *leans heavily against* EMIL'S *chair, her eyes following the two disappearing through the doorway.*]

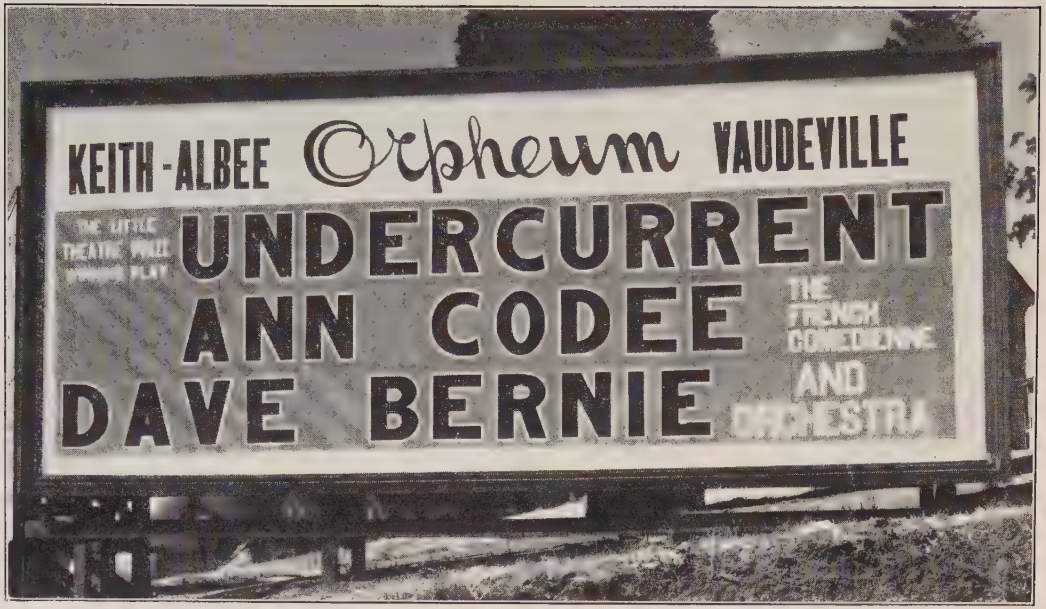
CURTAIN

Florence Thompson as Mrs. Floyd
Harriet Allyn as Ma Fishyer
Margaret Moore as Miss Page
Curt Benisch as Pa Fishyer
Charles J. White as Emil
Gladys Pfeffer as Annie

THE CAST OF "THE UNDERCURRENT" AT THE PALACE THEATRE, NEW YORK CITY, JANUARY 20–26, 1929



SCENE DESIGN

"THE UNDERCURRENT"



Los Angeles, California, October 7–13, 1928

LOS ANGELES EXAMINER

OCTOBER 19, 1928

THE TURNING POINT

GLADYS PFEFFER and CURT BENISCH in "The Undercurrent," at the Hillstreet.—(Drawing by Ellen Danar.)

THE PRESS

THE PRESS

HOW YOUR MONEY HELPS

The varied phases of an organization like the Albany Community Chest are services that are difficult to illustrate in any vivid way to the public that supports the philanthropy, and much of its praise must needs go unsung, if not unhonored.

Twenty-five per cent of the funds collected for the Chest are devoted to extending and supporting social service that acts as a sort of human adjuster in homes where things greatly need adjusting. The Chest can claim a friend; one that is not directly propaganda for its work, in the playlet, "The Undercurrent," that is being acted at Proctor's Grand. It is the work of Miss Fay Ehlert of Chicago and reveals the value of a woman social service worker in entering a squalid home where the father's domineering and brutalizing mind is driving his young daughter from the home to possible disaster away from it. In fact, she is accused of theft, and it is the understanding and sympathy of this social worker that saves the girl. She tells a brave falsehood as to the girl's previous whereabouts and saves her thus from the wrath of the father. Then she takes the girl with her to

make the untruth come true in a finer and more wholesome atmosphere for the girl.

Probably Miss Ehlert has seen some such incident in service work in Chicago. One could find it in any city and it is this unofficial court of domestic relations that the Albany Community Chest partially supports in its work of helping to make better citizens or to save normally good citizens from demoralizing trends.

"The Undercurrent" is a forceful and convincing illustration of the good your money does when it is given to the Community Chest.

—Editorial in *The Knickerbocker Press,*
Albany, N. Y., April 9, 1929.

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THE THEATRE AND SOCIAL SERVICE

In every city and town nowadays there is a social service organization, or a group of unselfish citizens—usually women—devoted to the betterment of home life among the poor, the ignorant and even lawless families. It is work that requires infinite tact, patience and sympathy with the sorrows and trials of unfortunate and unhappy families. In the great cities the social service workers are often endowed organizations. In small communities they depend upon the occasional and voluntary donations of prosperous neighbors. The very confidential nature of the quiet ministrations of the social service worker prevents the exploitation of their achievements or the publication of their daily and nightly tasks in detail.

Many generous givers to this priceless cause may not

realize how their money is applied, how it helps not only the poor but also misguided families in which cruelty, domestic misunderstanding and deceit are making for the disruption of what should be happy homes.

There is now touring the R-K-O vaudeville circuit, a one-act play called "The Undercurrent," which not only throws the searchlight of truth upon the motives and deeds of the social service worker, but incidentally illustrates how the theatre may exert a helpful influence towards the extension and understanding of non-sectarian social service.

This little play, written by Mrs. Fay Ehlert, wife of the Chilean Consul in Chicago, and herself a social service worker, has been one of the popular successes of major vaudeville in every theatre where it has been presented. It is neither propaganda nor preachment, standing bravely upon its own feet as a tense, tender and convincing record of unhappy family life into which a wise and womanly social service friend is able to bring peace and a large measure of happiness. The phenomenal popular success of this dramatic sketch should impress practical theatrical producers that they can exercise a powerful (and profitable) hand in helping to save normally good citizens from demoralizing trends by presenting true and compelling plays or sketches which demonstrate with dramatic fidelity such incidents of life and service as those depicted in "The Undercurrent."

Such a play, absorbing and timely in interest, not only designates the special humanitarian deeds of such workers in social service, but also informs the pleased audi-

ence how the money spent by the public in such channels helps the unhappy without betraying confidences and without boastful stories in the newspapers.

—*Floyd B. Scott* in *The Magazine of Vaudeville,*
April 21, 1929.

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A THEATRICAL VENTURE

For some years American theatrical managers have defended their choice of programs by pleading that they must give the public what it wants. Their critics have replied that the managers have signally failed to understand the public taste. They have backed up this assertion by pointing to the astonishing growth in recent years of the Little Theatre movement.

The amateur theatre is to-day not only holding its own against the professional stage—it has actually begun to invade it. For evidence of this one has only to cite the one-act play, "The Undercurrent," by Fay Ehlert, which heads the bill this week at the Orpheum Theatre.

"The Undercurrent," it may be recalled, was this year's prize-winning play of the Chicago Little Theatre tournament. . . .

Arrangements were made under which the original cast should tour with "The Undercurrent" during the summer recess. No attempt was to be made to professionalize the production. All its fine amateur quality with its refreshing freedom from conventionalized forms was to be retained. . . .

What the venture may mean to the cause of good drama can be easily foreseen. It will enlarge the scope and value of the Little Theatre movement everywhere,

and encourage the writing and presenting of more and better dramatic sketches. It will cultivate and improve the public taste and re-create public interest in the drama. And it will bring some fine new blood into the acting profession.

—Editorial in *The Winnipeg Tribune,*
Friday, August 24, 1928.

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R-K-O WATCHING LITTLE THEATRE MOVEMENT

President Brown of Radio-Keith-Orpheum Sends Scouts to Review and Secure Best Playlet

Hiram S. Brown, president of the Radio-Keith-Orpheum Vaudeville Circuit, in order to encourage and acquire good short plays, dramatic sketches and worthy one-act playlets, has advised local representatives to review the tournaments and independent reproductions of the Little Theatre movements, throughout the country. The immediate and continued success of "The Undercurrent," the prize-winner of the Chicago Little Theatre tournament—now touring the R-K-O Circuit, has been so marked that Mr. Brown and George A. Godfrey, chief of the booking department, have determined to continue a plan of "prospecting" and developing other products of the Little Theatre.

"The Undercurrent," after months of brilliant success, starting in the R-K-O houses of Chicago, came East to further emphasize the fact that vaudeville patrons are eager for this sort of innovation in their favorite form of amusement. It played Keith's Palace a short while

ago, and at the B. F. Keith Memorial Theatre, Boston, last week, this short play became an immediate success with the Boston vaudeville public.

A leading editorial (not a dramatic review) in the Boston Post says of it:

"It is neither sensational nor flamboyant, but a burning human drama, twenty minutes of thrilling suspense with a touching climax. There is real hope for the legitimate drama when a vaudeville house makes a play like this one a feature on the bill."

The original cast of "The Undercurrent" was made up of talented amateurs, but its merits were obvious and proved to be exactly to the tastes and preferences of every Vaudeville audience which has witnessed it.

Radio-Keith-Orpheum now is "hot on the trail" of more dramatic one-acters of like quality.

—*The Magazine of Vaudeville,* Palace Theatre,
New York City, March 31, 1929.

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IN A VAUDEVILLE PROGRAM

One doesn't expect to find a sermon in a vaudeville program. Yet one of the most powerful sermons ever presented in Cheyenne was a feature of the program of the Lincoln theater Thursday evening. It was Fay Ehlert's playlette, "The Undercurrent." Too bad that every parent in Cheyenne could not have seen that tabloid drama. To have done so would have been wholesome for some, perhaps for many. The observation may be validly applied in virtually every community of more than a few families.

THE UNDERCURRENT

"The Undercurrent" is repulsive. It is brutal. It rasps the sensibilities. It emphasizes excrutiatingly the significance of the phrase "the truth hurts." The hurting, however, the repulsiveness, the brutality, are wholesome in effect.

The little drama, the whole course of which is run in less time than is required for presentation of one act of an ordinary play, deals with a self-centered parent's inability to understand that conceptions of parental responsibility and authority which were forced on him in his youth are incongruous and impossible in another environment and another period. The effects of his blind wrath, which he regards as righteous, make the observer shudder.

The little play's worth lies in that there is in many, many homes, some taint of the immorally "moral" atmosphere which blighted the home which the drama depicts. Generally, happily, this taint is slight, but it is, nevertheless, a thing that may have dreadful consequences. To have the fact called to attention is good for the soul.

Mrs. Ehlert's little masterpiece undoubtedly has sweetened the atmosphere of many a home.

—Editorial in *Wyoming State Tribune,*
October 26, 1928.

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HOPE FOR THE THEATRE

The work which the "Little Theatres" of the country are doing can best be judged by the prize-winning play of the Chicago Little Theatre Tournament, which is on

the bill at Keith's Memorial Theatre this week. This play, "The Undercurrent," written by Fay Ehlert, has had a remarkable success.

It is neither sensational nor flamboyant, but a burning human drama, 20 minutes of thrilling suspense with a touching climax. There is a real hope for the legitimate drama when a vaudeville house makes a play like this one a feature of the bill.

—Editorial in *The Boston Post,*
Monday, March 25, 1929.

WHAT ONE WOMAN DID

When Mrs. Fay Ehlert brought "The Undercurrent" to Broadway a few weeks ago, she proved that she had the courage of her convictions. So also did the bookers —for playlets had not been in such good standing in major vaudeville. In fact, there had been evinced a general disinclination to book playlets of any kind, with special reference, of course, to those of a serious nature. However, the critics upon reviewing "The Undercurrent" during its run at the New York Palace were so enthusiastic that there no longer was any doubt as to the way in which this particular play in little was regarded by the critical fraternity and by those who do not always agree with it—that is, our theatregoers. The bookers also showed what they thought of the whole proceeding by freely routing the playlet into the larger houses of the East.

What particularly interested dramatic authors, how-

ever, was the fact that "The Undercurrent" brought back, in some degree at least, the vogue of the playlet, although, of course in the final analysis, the quality of the dramalets presented by other writers must be the deciding element in the decision as to the future of the playlet in vaudeville. At any rate, the clever Mrs. Ehlert must be given credit for having written a serious, one might almost say, sombre playlet so filled with the various essentials of living and with characterizations so skillfully and effectively drawn that she has turned the eyes of the critical in the direction of a form of entertainment which had so long been unhonored and unsung, and which seems at last to be coming into its own again. In other words, it does not really seem to be a question of whether the public wants serious playlets but of whether other scripts can be found that contain the elements of humanity and the struggle against the fates as shown so effectively and sympathetically in "The Undercurrent."

Fay Ehlert may be regarded somewhat as a female Christopher Columbus, who has charted new seas and sailed into port with colors flying.

—Editorial in *The Vaudeville News and New York Star,* March 16, 1929.

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"THE UNDERCURRENT"

Thousands who saw and heard "The Undercurrent" at the Orpheum last week were given an unforgettable lesson. Thousands more might hear it to better advantage as time goes along and the country and society generally

would be better for it. In brief, a tyrannical father browbeating wife and children with rules of conduct even down to terrorism over the most trivial incidents, substituted fear for love in the hearts in the home circle. "Bring up a child in the way he should go" was his axiom which he enforced with the big stick. The result was what might be expected where the sublime note of the Nazarene, "Love one another," was forgotten. A social worker checking up a wayward child uncovered the misery of wife and children and rescued the girl.

We don't know how far such rigidity in loveless homes extends. It does not seem possible that father or mother could exert such tyranny. But there is no question that the attitude which this sketch so powerfully portrays is a serious factor in the making of society as it is to-day. Suppression by force creates the situation that leads to an explosion with disastrous results. This was the case not many years ago with the Romanoff dynasty of Russia; it is the inevitable result in the nation, the state and in the home. We do not doubt that dregs in the social scale too often result from blind, unintelligent, inhuman tyranny in the home. The Teacher of Nazareth certainly reminded the world of that when he said of the commandments, "The greatest of these is love."

—Editorial in *Evening World Herald,*
Omaha, Neb., November 12, 1928.

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THE AMATEUR ARRIVES

At what stage in its development the tribe began to seek means of collectively expressing itself must be left

to the author of the "Golden Bough" to determine. Rudyard Kipling, however, having made some slight study of the organization of the Solutreans, arrived at the conclusion that the modes adopted about the time the glacial ice began to retreat from France and Great Britain were numerous and altogether sound. "There are nine-and-sixty ways of composing tribal lays, and every single one of them is right," he observes.

To-day the tribe still has its lays, but it calls them one-act plays by amateurs. They are just as authentic as the lays of the Solutreans, but the professional producer labors under the obsession that, whether there are sixty-nine ways, or more, or less, of writing them, every single one of them is wrong from the standpoint of the regular theatre. The professional producer has a formula the substance of which is that a play, to succeed, must be written to what is understood to be the order of the audience. Certain things that will "get across" must be put into it; certain others must be carefully excluded. So audiences listen year after year to standardized productions, interspersed at rare intervals by the works of the few men of genius who are strong enough to make their own rules.

. . . . . .

The amateur, therefore, is driven to the Little Theatre and this at once effectually damns him in the eyes of professional producer and professional critic alike. As a famous Chicago critic wrote, nothing that is any good can come out of the Little Theatre, and it rather increases its handicap if a playlet wins a prize in a Little Theatre contest.

The impossible, however, has happened. A Little Theatre play has not only won acceptance on the Orpheum Circuit but has become the head-liner. The play is "The Undercurrent," and it is astonishingly outside the limits of the formula mentioned above. The author, Mrs. Fay Ehlert, owes her first chance to enter the field in competition with the "regulars" to the chairman of the circuit. . . .

He was willing to try anything once, so he had it put on at a Sunday matinée in Chicago, before the hardest possible audience. It was not even set down on the bill for that first try-out. It was not only at the disadvantage of being the curtain-raiser, but it was acted by amateurs, students and professors of the Northwestern University, who, unaccustomed to the auditorium, spoke in tones too low. Furthermore, it was a "sad" play. In short, every element was present that seemed from the beginning to preclude success.

. . . . . .

But it succeeded as only one play in years succeeds. The hard-faced men who attend Sunday afternoon performances in Chicago sat silent for a moment when the curtain fell and then broke into tremendous applause, giving the first of the series of repeated curtain-calls that was to mark the subsequent progress of "The Undercurrent" on the Orpheum Circuit. Localized as the action is in a city of the United States, and limited in time almost to the moment, the playlet, nevertheless, contains elements of universality that have made it as acceptable in Canada as across the border. It was presented for the

first time in Vancouver on Monday at the Orpheum and is on the bill for the rest of the week.

Criticism of the play as a play appears in another column of The Morning Star. Suffice it to say here, that whatever its strictly dramatic value, it demonstrates that the tribal lay is rightly written when it is so written as to tell the tribal story, and without any design of effecting specific reactions among its auditors.

In other words, if the play, whether a one-act playlet or a drama in three acts, truly interprets the tragedy and comedy of life, the reactions will take care of themselves, the climaxes will come in their natural places, and instead of a machine-made production, trim and neat, a living thing will appear which its very excresences and awkwardnesses will only make more vital.

"The Undercurrent" will not be the last Little Theatre play to be billed along with "sister acts" and song-and-dance features. The tribe is likely to hear its own lays hereafter in the middle of the clearing.

—Editorial in *The Morning Star,*
Vancouver, B. C., September 4, 1928.

IGNORANT MAKE VIRTUE A CRIME

It is seldom that a vaudeville audience, or for that matter any other audience, has an opportunity of seeing so perfect a piece of stagecraft as "The Undercurrent," which was shown last week at Nixon's Grand Opera House on the R-K-O circuit.

The one-act play presented a vivid picture of life, the characters being a brutal janitor and his brow-beaten wife, their son and daughter, a mischievous neighbor and a social worker.

The playlet showed many things. It showed how, in the hands of the ignorant, virtue is transformed into a cruel crime. Pa Fishyer has a code of good conduct which he instills into his family with blows and paternal tyranny. The family is spiritually sick, and they fear and hate him. The playet is another evidence of growing self-consciousness and a return visit would be more than welcome.

—Editorial in *Philadelphia Daily News,*
March 18, 1929.

MRS. FAY EHLERT

To-day, at 1 P. M., in Beury Auditorium, the author of "The Undercurrent," a one-act play, will address Temple University students under the auspices of the Templayers.

It is interesting to note that "The Undercurrent," which Mrs. Fay Ehlert submitted to the Little Theatre tournament in Chicago, won the Edith Rockefeller McCormick cup, the first prize. What is even more interesting and should arouse the investigation by students is that this playlet is regarded by many critics as the greatest one-act production ever written.

Temple students should avail themselves of this rare opportunity to meet or listen to Mrs. Ehlert. There is

no doubt that she will have a message to give to her audience, especially that group interested in contemporaneous dramatics. Occasions like this help to round up the education of college students for they bring to the college speakers who are in actual contact with authorities in the work-a-day practical world.

—Editorial in *Temple University News,*
Philadelphia, Pa., March 8, 1929.

The thanks of a public extending far beyond the comparatively narrow limits of vaudeville most assuredly will be heaped on President Abram S. Brown of R-K-O for his recent declaration in favor of stretching the major circuit's policy in regard to the one-act play. . . .

Often, in fact much too often, the former administrations of the big time have promised solemnly that they will boost the one-act play. . . . It has almost reached the point, however, where the cry of "Wolf" has been given too often. Yet, with the undisputed success of Fay Ehlert's classic of a one-acter, *The Undercurrent,* ringing in our ears, we can conceive of the big time being really in earnest now to boost sketch material as it has never been boosted before. After all, *The Undercurrent* is making money for R-K-O, and it is creating good will. Every movement needs its leader. The dramatic sketch in vaudeville has one in Mrs. Ehlert and her knockout of a sketch.

Bringing the one-acter back to its old place in the

vaudeville realm will mean more to vaudeville (as vaudeville and not as an impersonal link in a monopolistic chain) than any single factor we can think of at this writing. The sketch fills a place that cannot be usurped by flash and acrobatic acts and "whoopee" units. One can't get away from the fact that there has been something vitally lacking in vaudeville these last several seasons while the sketch has been wearing the weeds as a grass widow, divorced from its rightful mate, vaudeville.

We like and heartily applaud Hi Brown's publicized determination to boost the one-acter. He can stop our little show any day in the week by proving to us and all the others interested that he means what he says.

—Editorial in *The Billboard,*

April 13, 1929.

THE THEATRE'S POWER

One of the splendid examples of the excellent work by the "Little Theatres" of this country is to be staged in Albany next week in Fay Ehlert's "The Undercurrent," booked for the Grand.

In these days of "whoopee" shows, canned music and celuloid thrillers it is refreshing to find, of all places, in a vaudeville bill a burning human drama that drives home a moral lesson, vividly and concisely and makes

one feel that the theatre is actually a force in the development of American character.

There is a real hope for the legitimate drama when a vaudeville house makes a play like this one a feature of its bill.

—Editorial in *The Albany Citizen,*
April 5, 1929.

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THE UNDERCURRENT

Ugyancsak nyitott szemmel kell a világban járni annak, aki a minden szépitgetés nélküli reális életet akarja a szinpadra vinni a maga kegyetlen, hideg és kiméletlen valóságában. A körülöttük mozgó zavaros athmoszféra minden furcsaságát és szertelenségét legkevésbé azok érzékelik, kik szenvedő alanyai az élet kisebb-nagyobb tragikumának.

Más légkörben élő és tisztultabb erkölcsi érzékkel rendelkező egyének képesek csak megérteni azokat a szenvedéseket és belőlük levonható tanulságokat, mik az emberi erények és gyengeségek összeütközéséből keletkeznek.

A mindennapi élet soha meg nem szünő apró tragikumait szinpadra csak lehet vinni, ha azok a megszólalásig hüvisszatükröződései az életnek. Máskülönben unalmas, szintelen és erőtlen a darab, mert apró drámák — kis szenzációk.

A nyomort, sötétséget és emberi szenvedést meg-

kapóbban Maxim Gorkijnál senki sem tudta szinpadra vinni. Azonban Gorkij egy férfi volt, kinek irányát követni csak férfiak merészelték, mert alacsonyabb lelki életet élők világának tanulmányozására a gyengébb nem idegrendszere nem volt berendezve.

Azonban a modern nő lépést tart a férfiakkal és nem riad vissza olyan problémák fejtegetésétől, mikre a tegnap nője még borzalommal gondolt volna. Egy ilyen uttörő, modern nő Fay Ehlert, ki "Undercurrent" cimü egy felvonásos drámájában merész kézzel, de érző szivvel tár elénk egy mindennapi életképet, melynek milliőjét Gorkij sem választhatta volna meg reálisabban. Ez az izigvérig modern nő megtalálja még a legsötétebb környezetben is a jót és nemeset, az egyszerü külső alatt is finoman érzékeny szivet, s a határtalan anyai szeretetnek és aggodalomnak egyszerü keresetlen szavakban annyi melegseggel képes kifejezést adni, hogy a közönség átérzi, sőt átéli a szeme előtt lejátszódó kis tragédia minden fájdalmát.

—Editorial in *Philadelphia-I Függetlenség—Independence*, March 15, 1929.

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"THE UNDERCURRENT"

Fay Ehlerts packende Skizze aus dem Leben.
Zugstück in Keith's Palace Theater.

Wer in ein Vaudeville-Theater geht, weiß meistens schon im voraus, was er zu sehen bekommt. Manchmal wird man

aber überrascht, angenehm überrascht, wie diese Woche im Keith's Palace Theater. Tanz und Gesang rauschen an uns vorüber, auf einmal, plötzlich und unerwartet, steht man mitten im Leben, draußen auf der Straße der Großstadt, oder in der „Basement"-Küche eines Hausverwalters, des „Janitors" eines amerikanischen Wohnhauses. Die Vorgänge in der Familie versetzen uns in die rauhe Wirklichkeit. Der Vater glaubt seinen Erziehungspflichten zu genügen, wenn er seine zwei Kinder, Annie und Emil, recht streng behandelt, zu sklavischen Gehorsam erzieht, so wie man es „vordem" mit ihm gemacht hat. Er erreicht aber gerade das Gegenteil. Die Mutter erzittert in Furcht vor ihm, und die Kinder schlagen den falschen Weg ein. Wir lesen so viel über Kindererziehung und modernes Familienleben, hier ist ein-aktiges Drama, „The Undercurrent" von Fay Ehlert, das jeder Vater und jede Mutter sich ansehen sollte.

Dem wahren Leben entnommen, packt das Stück mit unwiderstehlicher Gewalt und gibt jedem, den Vätern, Müttern, getreuen Nachbarn und desgleichen, eine gute Lehre mit auf den Weg. Kein Wunder, daß das Haus nach der Vorstellung in Beifallsstürme ausbrach und der Vorhang sich achtmal hob und senkte, die Zuschauer im Theater sitzen blieben, um das Stück ein zweites Mal zu sehen, während inzwischen draußen auf der Straße die Schaulustigen in langen Reihen standen und ungeduldig auf Einlaß warteten. Eine wunderbare Skizze, von Fay Ehlert den Tiefen des Menschenherzens abgelauscht!

Die Verfasserin hat das Stück selbst in Szene gesetzt und sich auch hierbei als Künstlerin erwiesen. Gespielt wurde von den Vertretern der verschiedenen Rollen mit staunenswerter Echtheit. Da muß zuerst Harriet Allyn erwähnt werden, die in der Rolle der Mutter eigentlich einen Charakter schuf, der im Theaterleben bis jetzt nur sehr

selten zu finden war, eine von Angst und Fürsorge für die Kinder und unterwürfigem Gehorsam gegen den Mann zermürbte Frau.

Die Unterströmung, die das ganze Stück durchzieht, ist das Wesen des Vaters. Er hat die gute Absicht, seine Kinder ordentlich zu erziehen. Manchmal fühlt man Mitleid mit dem Mann, der in seiner Unkenntnis der menschlichen Psyche den Bogen allzustraff spannt. Wir könnten uns keinen besseren Vertreter für die Rolle denken als Curt Benisch. Seine verhaltene Wut, seine zurückgedämmte Kraft, das Bewußtsein, daß er unbedingt recht handelt nach seinen Begriffen, das alles wußte Curt Benisch in großem Künstlertum zum Ausdruck zu bringen. Die Zuschauer saßen in nervöser Spannung, daß sein Temperament unerwartet auch über sie hereinbrechen möchte.

Fast ohne ein Wort zu sprechen, zeichnete Charles White den Sohn; in Kostüm und Ausdruck durchaus lebenswahr wird die Tochter Annie von Gladys Pfeffer gespielt; die schwatzhafte, klatschsüchtige Nachbarin und das versöhnende Element, die Wohlfahrtsdame, finden in Florence Thompson und Ethel Swift geeignete Vertreter. Alles in allem: ein glänzendes Stück, brillant inszeniert und ganz hervorragend gespielt. Hut ab!

—*Wächter und Anzeiger,*
Cleveland, Ohio, December 12, 1928.

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PRZEDSTAWIENIE SŁAWNEJ AUTORKI

W naszem mieście będziemy mieli sposobność zobaczyć po raz pierwszy sztukę p. t. "The Undercurrent," napisaną przez Panią Fay Ehlert, żonę

Konsula tego kraju do Chile. Sztuka ta jest napisaną na tle życia ubogiego stróża, mieszkającego w suterynie wraz z rodziną.

Sztuka "The Undercurrent" spotkała się z wielu trudnościami i przeszkodami, zanim dostała się na scenę. Wiadomem jest, jak nieraz autor, bardzo utalentowany, pisze, pracuje z zaparciem siebie, wykończa swoje dzieło w najlepszej myśli, w najlepszej wierze—i w końcu spotyka się z zawodem, z trudnościami różnemi, zanim jego dzieło jest przyjęte przez któregoś z dyrektorów teatralnych. Taki też los spotkał i Panią Ehlert, która wszystkie siły swego talentu wytężała i pracowała nad wykończeniem swej sztuki. Wiele by trzeba bylo poświęcić czesu, aby opisać, jakie trudności miała Pani Ehlert, aby zwrócić uwagę któregoś z impresarjów teatralnych na swą sztukę. Chodziła od jednego do drugiego dyrektora i wszędzie spotykała się z odmowa. Nie dała jednak za wygraną. Wierząc mocno w gruntowną wartość swej pracy, swego dzieła—dopięła celu. Na sztukę jej zwrócił uwagę jeden ze znawców, ocenił ją i wystawił na scenie.

Gdy pierwszy raz sztuka była odegrana, wywołała ona wielki entuzjazm wśród publiczności.—Wszyscy dyrektorzy, którzy przedtem odmówili, zauważyli, że popełnili wielki błąd i z żalem przyznali, że istotnie "The Undercurrent" jest dziełem artystycznem w swym rodzaju, którego oni nie umieli wpierw ocenić.

Dobitnym dowodem zainteresowania się publicz-

ności tą sztuką jest fakt, że była ona grana od Kalifornji do New Yorku w pierwszorzędnych teatrach około ośmset razy.

Z końcem tego tygodnia, to jest we czwartek, piątek i sobotę, sztuka ta jest wystawiana w teatrze Gaiety.

—*Maria G. Gomolska* in *Słowo Polskie*
April 19, 1929.

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HAIL THE PERFECT SKETCH!

Our humble genuflexions to its author, and a thousand thanks on behalf of all interested in the furtherance of the sketch in vaudeville to R-K-O for heaping upon it the distinction of booking it into the Palace and the choicest of its stands thruout the country. There may be better one-act plays, but we haven't seen them in vaudeville yet. The time may come; real soon, we hope, if the big-time executives can be made to see that vaudeville sorely needs sketches with even an iota of the merit of Mrs. Ehlert's brain child. In trade terms she has brought forth a Christ. As it winds its way thru the various sections of the country it will preach its mission, and who knows but at the end of its trail word will come of converts to the Great Cause. With "The Undercurrent" swinging along—and there's no reason why it should not keep up its energetic pace for a long, long time—the case for the dramatic sketch will be kept alive. Let the protagonists of this form of vaudeville entertainment heat their iron while the fire is hot.

Mrs. Ehlert's playlet is a paradox of homeliness and

beauty, combining these qualities in a homogeneous mass as it was permitted Abe Lincoln to do. Its drabness is not cheap and sensational. It points no lucid moral. Like those literary vignettes lately grown popular it presents to us a moving, compelling slice of real-life action. It is left for the spectator to draw his conclusions. Whatever they may be there are few of normal intelligence who will not react emotionally and intellectually to the problem presented by the plotless plot.

We are introduced to a janitor's hovel in the basement of an apartment building. We see the bull-headed, ignorant father going thru the routine of an evening in what he calls home. There is the warped, beaten and loving mother; her dull, bullied son and the wayward daughter. A slatternly neighbor comes into the scene and thru her we are introduced into various angles of the family's existence. Then enters a social worker. The human drama is on. It burns with its frankness and compels with its character drawing. We are made to see that the father, beaten into a senseless bully by his own progenitor, is in turn deluded into thinking that he is successful in beating doubtless virtue into his offspring. The girl is by nature a good girl, but her father's bullying has driven her into the streets, and thence into the morals court. The janitor prides himself on the hair-trigger control he possesses over his children, but to those less blinded by their own ego the boy hates him worse than rat poison, and the girl is fast being pushed to ruin. The social worker is evidently on the scene in the nick of time, this being incidentally the only vestige of a plot in the playlet. The father is about to learn of his daugh-

ter's police record from the blabbering tongue of the neighbor when the lady of the upper strata concocts an alibi and saves the girl from a volley of welts and punches. Miss Social Worker takes the girl away from the cesspool —for good. As they are leaving the janitor asks that he be informed if the girl gives her future guardian trouble. Miss Social Worker's parting shot, "You'd be a great help!" brings down the curtain.

We've said enough about the play. As for the cast, it is overwhelming in its fitness. The bright and particular star, from our angle, is Harriet Allyn. In her Ma Fishyer role she puts over a piece of character portrayal that hasn't been approached at the Palace since Lucille LaVerne fried bacon in Sun Up. It won't be long before the money boys nab her. Curt Benisch, as Pa Fishyer, also gives a sensational performance. He's a tabloid of Gregory Ratoff—and to us that means as good as they come. Gladys Pfeffer appeals mightily as the daughter, as does Charles White as the son. In her brief bits Florence Thompson does a corking job of the neighbor role. Margaret Moore was the least bit stiff in the social worker's part, but she's excused on the ground that she's a late addition to the cast. Reception here went to six curtain calls and a show stop.

—*Elias E. Sugarman* in *The Billboard,*

February 2, 1929.

SUPERBILL OF VAUDEVILLE ON AT THE PALACE

Despite handicaps well-nigh unsurmountable, "The Undercurrent," a one-act play by Fay Ehlert of Chicago,

not only made good at the Palace yesterday afternoon, but scored so decisively with the hard-boiled initial matinee audience of experienced vaudeville-goers as to leap to a headline position on an extraordinarily good bill—and that Palace Sunday matinee audience is seldom stampeded by anybody. Beatrice Lillie, for example, couldn't get under its crust, nor Willie Collier, nor Florence Reed, and if President Coolidge and King George should hook up as a dancing team, they'd have to dance as well as Bill Robinson to get by.

The handicaps "The Undercurrent" faced are these: (1) It originated in a "little theatre," and good comes as seldom out of the "little theatre" as out of Nazareth; (2) it won first prize in a Chicago "little theatre" tournament, the Edith Rockefeller McCormick cup, than which nothing would seem to spell surer damnation; (3) it is presented by the same group of Evanston "little theatre" actors who played it originally, a handicap to be overcome only by a miracle. The Orpheum circuit of experienced amusement purveyors felt all these things so poignantly as to be constrained to offer an apology for giving it a place on the hill—"encouragement of home talent," "civic pride," or something like that.

But "The Undercurrent" come through the ordeal with flying colors—and despite another handcap probably rectified by now, namely: the players, used to small halls, pitched their voices so low they were nearly lost in the vastness of the Palace auditorium.

"The Undercurrent" is a tense story of sordid tenement life—a sort of an echo of "John Ferguson," but not so much so as to rob Mrs. Ehlert of the glory of an original plot. This plot has to do with a stern, Bible-

reading, iron-willed janitor who has brought up his children in the way they should go, and whose daughter, escaping the stern discipline of the home, becomes a street walker. The episode pictured is the attempt of the daughter, her mother, and a social worker to keep the God-fearing janitor from finding out what his daughter has done. The plot is skillfully constructed, tense and explosive, and the acting is astonishingly good.

There is no severer test for a dramatic sketch than the song and dance atmosphere of a vaudeville show, and "The Undercurrent" demonstrated yesterday that it is at least three times as good as it must have seemed in the "little theatre" tournament at the Goodman Theatre.

—*C. J. Bulliet* in *Chicago Evening Post,*
June 25, 1928.

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Mrs. Ehlert's play shows searchingly how a bigoted foreign father brings ruin upon the happiness of his family by warping justice into injustice through his fanatical method of administering it. It is a tense drama packed with interest from start to finish.

The cast, the same that won the contest, is playing it at the Palace and giving an exceptionally fine performance, particularly C. Russell Small as the father, and Harriet Allyn as the mother. Excellent also are Gladys Pfeffer, Charles White, Ethel R. Swift and Helen Sanford. Over half a dozen curtain calls attested to that fact that an unusual offering such as this is a good piece of commercial "theatre" also.

—*Fritz Blocki* in *Chicago Evening American,*
Tuesday, June 26, 1928.

"It's an excellent one-acter, sharp, sure, unexpectedly effective."

—*Robert Garland* in *The New York Telegram,*
January 22, 1929.

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"This drama, which is sponsored by the Radio-Keith-Albee corporation, is an exceptionally fine contribution to the Vaudeville stage and far above the average sketch. A capable cast interpreted the roles."

—*Julius Cohen* in *Journal of Commerce,*
January, 22 1929.

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"THE UNDERCURRENT" ACTED AT THE PALACE

Chicago Little Theatre Prize Winning Play is Realistic

"It is written sincerely and observantly, and tells its not overburdening story with effective simplicity."

—*John Byram* in *The New York Times,*
January 21, 1929.

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"The author has captured the brutal atmosphere of a family in which the father, a janitor, believes that his children can be made to love him by continued mental and physical floggings, and has arranged the whole in a few deft situations."

—*New York Herald-Tribune,*
January, 22 1929.

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RADIO-KEITH-ORPHEUM PALACE TRACK

Winners at a glance.

1—"The Undercurrent"
2—Barry & Whitlege
3—Webb & Hay

"It has been a long time since a sketch has been as well received at this track as was "The Undercurrent" last Monday night. The fans received it like money from home. Which proves that when a sketch is what it should be, it will be as well received as any other act. . . . This sketch would be good for a route, for it will play equally well anywhere."

—*Paul Sweinhart* in *Zit's,*

January 26, 1929.

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MANHATTAN MADNESS

"To get good sketches for vaudeville is difficult, for to tell a story in 15 minutes, a complete story with a dramatic climax and coherent plot, gripping from beginning to end, requires exceedingly great skill. But this is what Mrs. Fay Ehlert has accomplished in "The Undercurrent," at the Palace Theatre, after seven months' touring over R-K-O time. . . . Editorial comment has been showered on this terse little drama and it never fails to grip each audience and cause tremendous applause."

—*Robert Coleman* in *Daily Mirror,*

New York, N. Y., Monday, January 21, 1929.

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NOBLE

Our Noble Prize award for today: To Mrs. Fay Ehlert, authoress of "The Undercurrent," the Chicago Little Theater prize-winning skit, now a feature of the Palace bill closing today, for its inherent entertaining merits.

—*Ohio State Journal,*
Columbus, November 28, 1928.

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PALACE

"The Undercurrent," by Fay Ehlert, winner of the Edith Rockefeller McCormick cup in the recent Little Theatre contest, was presented in the four-spot. The play deals with a wayward daughter, Bible-reading father from the old country, social worker from the morals court, gossip and a brow-beaten mother and son. Whole family very much in awe of the stern father of the "old school," with the little skit packing a tremendous wallop and holding the breaths of the house straight through from start to finish."

—*Variety,*
June 27, 1928.

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"The Undercurrent," prize-winning play of the Chicago Little Theatre tournament, was in third position, and upon conclusion took nine curtains, none of which were begged. Harriett Allyn as a janitor's wife, Curt Benisch as her husband, and Florence Thompson as a

neighbor, brought to this arty dramatic sketch a talent which made it outstanding and an act to be remembered."

—*Inside Facts of Stage and Screen,*
Los Angeles, Saturday, Oct. 13, 1928.

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AT THE PALACE

"Occupying an important spot at the Palace this week is a sketch straightly dramatic and singularly different from the general run of sketches . . . A hideous cruel picture that Mrs. Ehlert has drawn with no small amount of skill . . . An extraordinarily sincere and effective one-act play."

—*Jeffery Holmesdale* in *The World,*
New York, January 22, 1929.

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AT THE PALACE

"This observer, who has sat and squirmed through many a dull playlet on the Orpheum boards, found himself (with the rest of the audience) vigorously applauding a one-acter that has not a laugh in it. . . . It is heavily tragic, but so truly written and ably performed that it gripped the attention of an audience that had expected the worst. The cast took six curtain calls, an amazing thing for unknown players in an unknown playlet. The play comes to New York after a similar success over the whole R-K-O route, and if Vaudeville's new moguls have any lingering doubts that Palace audiences will ap-

preciate worthy sketches, the reception to Mrs. Ehlert's work should clear their minds."

—*Carl Helm* in *The New York Sun,*

January, 22 1929.

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PLAYLET AIDS PALACE BILL

Clever Sketch Tops Offering

"If you can be thrilled by as perfectly written and presented a one-act playlet as has ever been offered to a Vaudeville audience, the Palace Theatre, where Fay Ehlert's "The Undercurrent" is one of the chief offerings on an excellent program, is the spot for that type of reaction this week. . . . For its first New York showing the Palace Theatre was selected. The Palace has many times shown a restlessness during dramatic acts of this type. Sunday afternoon that same audience seemed to sit spellbound. Mrs. Ehlert has not only shown herself a word-character painter of ability, but she has also proved her adeptness in staging a playlet which she has done herself."

—*H. David Strauss* in *The Morning Telegraph,*

January 21, 1929.

LETTERS

LETTERS

GENERAL FEDERATION OF WOMEN'S CLUBS

1928–1930

DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC WELFARE
MRS. SAIDIE ORR-DUNBAR, CHAIRMAN
310 FITZPATRICK BLOCK, PORTLAND, OREG.

Division of Correction
MISS JULIA K. JAFFRAY, CHAIRMAN
730 FIFTH AVE., NEW YORK, N. Y.

PRESIDENT
MRS. JOHN F. SIPPEL
307 ST. DUNSTAN'S ROAD, HOMELAND
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GENERAL HEADQUARTERS
1734 N STREET, N. W.
WASHINGTON, D. C.

MRS. VALENTINE B. FISHER
707 TWELFTH STREET, BOULDER, COLO.

MRS. B. F. WESTMORE
716 OLD NATIONAL BANK BLDG., SPOKANE, WASH.

May 13, 1929.

MY DEAR MRS. EHLERT:

May I congratulate you most heartily upon "The Undercurrent" which I saw last Saturday night. It shows a very keen insight into "things as they are"—everyone

meaning well, everyone blundering and all grieving that a young girl is going wrong.

Not since Jean Webster in "Daddy Long Legs" interpreted the treatment generally accorded to orphans have I seen as faithful and striking a picture of the well-meaning forces which wreck young lives.

I understand that the play is now available for amateurs and will do all in my power to induce women's clubs to present it. The results will be telling!

Can't you take little Annie to a Woman's Reformatory and in picturing her life there show those of us dealing with reformatory problems where we are falling short?

Every good wish for continued success.

Cordially yours,
Julia K. Jaffray
Chairman

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NEW YORK STATE FEDERATION OF WOMEN'S CLUBS

Mrs. Charles, J. Reeder, President
956 State Street, Carthage, N. Y.

MEMBERSHIP 400,000
ORGANIZED 1894

Department of Fine Arts
Division of Drama
Mrs. Edmund Gale Jewett
266 Washington Ave. Brooklyn, N. Y.

My dear Mrs. Ehlert,

I must congratulate you on your remarkable little play, "The Undercurrent."

I saw it one afternoon recently and was so impressed by its unusualness that I wanted my husband to see it

with me, so I saw it again last night with him. He felt about it just as I did.

What a story it tells in that short time! The characters are so sharply drawn. It is splendidly played. The effect on the audience was positively electric last night.

Audiences and their reactions are always of great interest to me. It seems a real feat for you to have gotten this play into Vaudeville—and yet how wise of Vaudeville.

I believe amateurs could give "The Undercurrent" with satisfaction.

It is a great little playlet, my dear Mrs. Ehlert. May it continue long on its brilliantly successful way.

Most sincerely,

(Mrs. Edmund Gale) Eugenie Jewett
Chairman Division Drama,
Department Fine Arts,
N.Y.S.F.W.C.

May the eleventh,
1929.

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March 12, 1929.

Mrs. Fay Ehlert,
Authoress, "The Undercurrent,"
The Roosevelt,
New York City.

Dear Mrs. Ehlert:

An urge impells me to say something regarding your play, "The Undercurrent." It is no inclination for flattery. It is not an ambition to produce a sales-talk. This

would be quite unnecessary since the public is "sold" on your play. Nor are my remarks designed as an advertising testimonial, stereotyped for renumeration. Most certainly, you have received a multitude of voluntary comments which are highly complimentary. Since I represent another field I will leave the critics concern themselves with the dramaturgical art of the play. Had I the time I would enjoy making a sociological study and analysis. By way of substitution I am enclosing "Some Sociological Reflections" which are for your encouragement. You may use them as you see fit.

Yours in appreciation,

HARRY F. WEBER,
Professor, Sociology of Histrionics.

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SOME SOCIOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS UPON FAY EHLERT'S "THE UNDERCURRENT"

By Dr. H. F. Weber, Prof. Sociology of Histrionics, Albright College, Myerstown, Pa.

Having an obsession for the sociological side of the drama-stage, I recently went to the theatre to estimate this alert (Ehlert) play called by the treacherous title, "The Undercurrent." This current dragged me into a janitor's basement room where I eddied helplessly in a whirl of life. Like the scoffer I staid to pray. Once I resisted the tow in an effort to ascertain the effect upon the audience but their dazzling, steady gaze stageward overcame me. This tabloid drama had blossomed into the universality of life. Back in the basement I remained until a kind curtain disenchanted me. My notebook was

blank. It is easy to realize why I speak of reflections rather than judgments, since my thoughts came after rather than with the presentation. Yet I did not forfeit my sensibilities even though my mind was in the play rather than upon it. "In the basement" I experienced several splendid and pleasant surprises:

1. The difference between my reading of the script and seeing the play.
2. That a play could be so "really real" and yet contain so much idealism.
3. That such a situation did not turn out to be a burlesque upon squalid life.
4. That the pornographic suggestion did not become obscene.
5. That so much of life could be concentrated into so small a space and time.
6. That a play not written with a problematic motive could touch upon so many social problems.
7. That the broken English dialogue could be made understandable throughout.
8. That so serious a play would be taken so seriously by the Vaudeville audience and so appropriate a part of the program.

The title was correct. Society does have its undercurrent which drags down helpless victims against their own efforts. The "plotless plot" reveals still other paradoxes:

1. Severe Sincerity.
2. Homely Beauty.
3. White Lie Truthfulness.

4. Cesspool Home.
5. Bitter Righteousness.
6. Forced Love.
7. Harsh Charity.
8. Homeward Waywardness.
9. Hereditary Environment.
10. Superior Inferiority.
11. American Immigrant.

The lesson-seekers as reformers, ministers, judges, educators, social workers, parents, sexologists, humanitarianists, eugenicists, euthenicists, and mere conversationalists can find innumerable "morals" hovering about each one of the characters of the play:

1. The thick-headed, self-centered, sincere, father;
   Domination of father, Harsh idealism from ancestors, Puritanism, Relation of parent to offspring, The immigrant in America, Old World views in the New World.
2. The long-suffering, helpless, warped, beaten, loving mother;
   Mother love, Dominated Womanhood, Equality of the sexes.
3. The dull, bullied, shut-in, son;
   Stifled personality, crushed individuality, Child guidance, Repression, The right to be well born, Child labor.
4. The good, wayward daughter;
   The Revolt of Youth, Social vice, Fallen women, Double standard of morals, Conditions of working

girls, Drawing power of mother love, Influence of associates.

5. The nosey, spiteful, slatternly neighbor;
   Intruding, meddling neighbors, jealousy, gossip, Keeping up (down) with the Joneses, "Flat ethics and etiquette."
6. The court investigating, social worker;
   Usefulness and necessity of the social worker, Solving cases of maladjustment, The milk of human kindness, Probation for innocent offenders, Not letter but spirit of the law, Not rules but common sense, Uncharitable charity.
7. The family in general;
   How the other half lives, Appreciation for blessings, Over-strict home life, Depressing slum environment, Ignorance, Poverty, Unemployment, Living wage, Standard of living, Equal opportunity, Ossification of society, The melting pot,—

But I must cease this vivisection or the play will be played out. It must not be torn into such small bits. Let it suffice to say that there is something in it for everyone and he who listens can hear between the lines. The play's value cannot be measured by the response from the chairs. "The Undercurrent" grips. The audience when scattered will remember it long after the best vaudeville joke is forgotten. The longer the memory the "gripper" the Undercurrent. The blighted home depicted will help to soften the atmosphere of the audient's own home, which heretofore however slight may have been tainted unwittingly by an undercurrent.

Perhaps then, the little masterpiece, in vaudeville called a sketch, does have a purpose. A discovery of it will have more sociological significance than for play-building technique. In the restricted sense of the latter there is no author's "moral." It does not present propaganda. Yet the vaudeville audience is bound to carry away a meaning.

Harlow in his "Growth of United States" writes, "Perfectly simple ideas, boldly stated and constantly reiterated, if given wide circulation, no matter whether they are truth or falsehood, have a powerful fascination for the majority of mankind." Just as the vaudeville stage is the feeder for all branches of amusement the vaudeville audience represents the most varied cross-section of society, and permeates itself through it. The vaudevillean by his "catch-phrases and wise-cracks" determines many social attitudes for his clients across the foot-lights. They, in turn picking up these "cleverisms," pass them on to their fellowmen as illuminating truths (modern proverbs).

It certainly must mean the elevation of social standards when "The Undercurrent" gets a hearing. It has a personality—when this human drama is on it corrals the emotions by its characterization, frankness, and reality. Like the best personalities it is contagious, makes others wish to hover near it, imitate it, admire it. In spite of proffering no solution to the many problems which it suggests, the audience goes away with the resolution that things must go better in the future. Out of the despair of this effective simple story arises hope. Although little ratiocination there will be contemplation. Perhaps few

will be transformed into saints but many will become more human.

All personality being elusive, it is difficult to determine from where the personality of this deft sketch comes,—the cast? the setting? the lines? the action? perhaps the author! One can be a little more certain where it goes. This will locate a purpose, hopefully the purpose. "The Undercurrent" audience senses the motive, "Life; not as a strange interlude of many excruciating acts, not as a morbid mundanity of an isolated act, but as mortal activity flavored with sympathy." The spirit of pity is propagated. Not that it is unfortunate to be compelled to live but that no one should be compelled to live unfortunately. Briefer stated this suggests "the more abundant life for all."

The playet with its clamorous reception as the sketch supreme appears to be prophetic of:

1. Better interhuman relationships.
2. Social values in a mechanistic standardized age.
3. Changes in the Drama-Stage; New things in vaudeville, Western inroads upon "Broadway," Conquest by the amateur.

SOME UNSURPASSED STUDENT IMPRESSIONS

In order to broaden the range of reaction, "The Undercurrent" was brought before the unsuspecting class in the Sociology of Histrionics. This course has as its objective the sociological study of the drama-stage. None of the class had heard of the play or its author. No effort

was made to arouse enthusiasm or to laud its merits, in fact quite the reverse. Eliminating the preliminary description and the directions for characterization, the script was read once in a monotone. Without further information or class discussion each student was asked to write upon scratch paper his or her opinion, especially including adverse criticism. They were given to understand that their papers would not be read in class or have any bearing upon their grades. No indication disclosed what use might be made of these impressions. The results under these handicaps are quite startling. The following extracts were made without the students' knowledge or permission.

The extremist of the class objected to the play as having no plot, a boresome foreign accent, a repulsive situation, a danger of tempting people to imitate that kind of life, better for children than adults, and that anyone who could appreciate such a play would have no capacity for good tragedy.

However the consensus of opinion of the class was quite different. One of the ladies felt, "The lesson taught by the play seemed to be the outstanding thing, the fact that the man was so wrong and yet could quote scripture to prove his point. . . . We can all easily become friends of the girl Annie, and pity her plight, especially when we know it is so true to life as we have heard of it. I do not like to bring the hardness and cruelty of life in its treatment of some people to everyone and as I have no better method to suggest—of bringing it before someone who might be able to help remedy the condition, I would not try to stop these plays. The characters

are very vividly portrayed, particularly the father's. When his lines were being read I suffered the reaction of wanting to stop them, to change it; I didn't want to hear it any further without doing something to that man. For this type of play I think it very good."

Quotations from other students follow:

"The play was suggestive of many things and many purposes."

"The play emphasized the fact that real strict parents create in their children hate and fear instead of love for them."

"It gives us an idea of the life one leads in a flat. The father was so cruel in his way of bringing up his children—they did not have a chance to speak for themselves. The social workers of the day can help children in such predicaments. It would also help children that have life easy and to appreciate the advantages they have."

"It was written for amusement and also to show the good many are doing on the streets of large cities for the fallen people. The author had in mind to make the parents, who saw or read the play, pay more attention and spend more educating time with them."

"Evidently the play is meant to bring out the fact that home environment and discipline has a great influence upon youth, and a home in which the young are so repressed, directed and curbed, the influence is liable to be a negative one. . . . The most difficult cases the social worker has to deal with are these. . . . The selfishness, strictness, blindness, and one-track-minds of parents are responsible for much of youthful delinquency and disgrace."

"A problem play to teach the effect of home life and conditions on the child's life and behavior. Introduces somewhat secondarily the work and place of the Morals Courts, which investigate the environment for the possible causes of crimes. Portrays living conditions of the ignorant and poverty-stricken class. . . . The play teaches its lesson. . . . An indirect method frequently is more successful than one whose purpose is known by all concerned."

"Training a child in the way he should go may be a good proverb, but it is not a wise plan to scare children into lying and leaving home, associating with wrong companions and thus getting into trouble. . . . It's a good play and many instances just like it occur nowadays. . . . The mother certainly realized what should be done."

And lastly will be given the unedited report of one who seemed indifferent during the single reading of the play:

"The play was interesting. It portrayed or was typical of the life it portrayed; that is, the slums. I had a vivid picture of the house and clear impression of the father in his burly way. The characters were well written. It was a good "unwritten" character sketch. You could easily judge or tell what type of characters they were. The plot was very simple but I think incompleted. The play was well named. We should have more of those type of plays because so many people do not realize how some people do exist. Of course there are some who would refuse to believe it but then it wouldn't do any harm for them to be informed. The type of play to have are those

true to life. Too many plays do not acquaint us with actual life and we are disillusioned. The 'ma' and 'pa' type are so frequent in the foreign element of our country that it is astounding. I like the dialect because if we are at all broad we will run across people who speak as they spoke and we should be able to understand. Some people are bored by those plays. I think they lack appreciation."